

Lu Xiaofeng

Author :

Gu Long

All Info:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lu_Xiaofeng

Synopsis:

Lu is best identified by his distinctive "Four Eyebrows" (四條眉毛), as he sports two strands of moustache that resemble his eyebrows, making him seem as though he has four eyebrows. He is described as a good-looking and attractive figure to many female admirers in the novels. He is an alcoholic, a flirt and a regular brothel visitor.

Lu's true personality and abilities are actually hidden behind his image of a flirt and alcoholic. He is extremely intelligent and observant like a fox, although it may not seem obvious, which enables him to solve the several mysteries in the series. His wit and cunning has also helped him escape from danger, often turning the tables on his enemies unexpectedly when he is apparently on the losing end. Lu also values friendship and often risks his own life to help his friends when needed.

Lu is best known for his 'Lingxi Finger' (靈犀一指), which allows him to catch and hold enemies' weapons between his fingers. He does not really use any particular weapon and often relies on his bare hands to fight enemies, even when he is being surrounded. Lu is a qinggong expert as well, and although Gu Long did not state explicitly Lu's qinggong capability in comparison with other characters, Lu is one of the top ten qinggong exponents in the series.

Translator:

Moinllieon

Foxs [<http://www.spcnet.tv/forums/member.php/19725-foxs>]

SpcNet.Tv Page:

<http://www.spcnet.tv/forums/showthread.php/38308-Lu-Xiaofeng-Unabridged>

Table of contents:

Book 1 - Lu Xiaofeng Chuanqi [The Legend of Lu Xiaofeng (or Golden Roc Empire)]

Book 2 - Xiuhua Dadao [Embroidery Bandit]

Book 3 - Juezhan Qianhou [Before and After the Duel]

Book 4 - Yin'gou Dufang [Silver Hook Casino]

Book 5 - Youling Shanzhuang [Youling Shanzhuang [Mansion of Spirits]

Book 6 - Fengwu Jiutian [Phoenix Dances in the Nine Heavens]

Book 7 - Jianshen Yixiao [Laughter of the Sword God]

Lu Xiao Feng Book 1:

The Golden Roc Empire - 金鵬王朝

(or 陸小鳳傳奇 – The Legend of Lu Xiaofeng)

Written by: Gu Long

Translated by : Moinllieon

Prologue

Grandma Xung's Sugar-Roasted-Chestnuts

The moon was round; the fog was thick. Covered by the thick fog, the full moon looked dim and desolate, enough to break a man's heart.

But Zhang Fang and his pals weren't in the mood to appreciate the view, they only want to walk around without any worries for once.

They have just finished an escort job from very far away; they also just finished drinking some wine. All the tensions and hard work were finally over. They were just as relaxed, carefree, and happy as can be. It was at this time when they saw Grandma Xung.

Grandma Xung had suddenly appeared out of the fog like a ghost. It was as if she had a huge invisible rock on her back, weighing her down so that her entire body was bent. It looked like her waist was about to snap.

In her hand was a very old bamboo basket; it was neatly covered by a very thick piece of cotton cloth.

"What's in the basket?", someone asked.

In as good of a mood as they were in, they would have taken an interest in anything.

"Sugar-Roasted-Chestnuts." The wrinkle-covered face of Grandma Xung broke out into a smile, "Sweet and hot Sugar-Roasted-Chestnuts, only 10 farthings a catty." {A catty is half a kilo}

"We'll take five catties, one catty each."

The chestnuts really were hot, and they really were sweet. But Zhang Fang only ate one.

He never liked chestnuts; besides, he had drank too much. He had only one chestnut when his stomach began feeling very sick, as if he was going to throw up.

He hadn't thrown up yet when he noticed that his pals suddenly all fell over. Once they fell over, their bodies immediately began to twitch as white foams start to form at the corner of their mouths.

The white foams suddenly turned red, turned into blood!

Grandma Xung was still standing there, looking at them, the smile on her face suddenly looked unspeakably terrifying.

"There's poison in the Sugar-Roasted-Chestnuts!" Zhang Fang gritted his teeth and wanted throw himself at her. But at this moment he felt as if he had no strength left in him.

He wanted to snap this grandma's neck, but he ended up landing at her feet. He suddenly noticed that hidden under the long gray dress of this grandma, she was wearing a pair of bright and colorfully

embroidered red shoes. Red like those worn by the bride on her wedding day.

But the shoes were not embroidered with a pair of loons, but an owl. The owl's eyes were green, as if it was staring at Zhang Fang, mocking at his stupidity and ignorance. Zhang Fang stared back at it in shock.

Grandma Xung laughed and said: "Turns out you are quite a naughty boy that likes to look at women's feet."

Zhang Fang struggled to lift his head up and asked: "What do you really have against us?"

Grandma Xung laughed and answered: "Stupid boy, I have never seen you guys before, what can I have against you guys?"

Zhang Fang gritted his teeth and asked: "Then why do you want to kill us?"

Grandma Xung casually replied: "No reason really, I just wanted to kill."

She looked up through the fog at the dim and desolate moon and slowly continued: "Whenever the moon is full, I want to kill!"

Zhang Fang stared at her, his eyes were filled with terror and rage. He liked nothing better than to bite down hard on her throat.

But suddenly, like a ghost, this grandma disappeared into the thick fog.

The fog was thick and hazy, and the moon became even rounder.

Honest Monk

The sun is setting in the west as the Autumn winds blew through the marsh reeds. There was not a trace of humans on the shores. Only a crow flying closer and closer, finally landing on a wooden post on the shore that's used for tying up boats.

This was a desolate dock to begin with, and now the boat had left for its last crossing.

The man manning the boat was a man so old that even his beard was white. Every day for the last 20 years, he had been shuttling back and forth between the two shores of the river on this old boat of his. There is not much left in life to makes him happy anymore, only drinking and gambling.

But tonight he swore he would not gamble. For there was a monk on his boat. This monk looked very proper, very honest, but a monk is still a monk.

Every time he's seen a monk, he would lose all the money on him.

This Honest Monk sat there very properly at a corner of the boat, looking down at his own feet, very dirty feet. On his very dirty feet, he was wearing a pair of very worn straw sandals.

Others sat as far away from him as they could, as if they were afraid of

the fleas on his body would get on themselves.

The Honest Monk didn't dare to look back others as well, not only was he honest, he was also very shy.

So even when the bandits jumped on the boat, he did not look up either, only hearing the passengers' surprised screams followed by the sound of four men jumping onto the head of the boat. Then he heard the bandits viciously threatened, "We are all the heroes of the Water Snake Clan, we have always only wanted money and not lives, so you guys need not be scared, just hand over all the money and valuables on you and everything will be fine."

The setting sun shined on the sabres in their hands, the reflection from the sabres lit up the inside of the boat. Inside the boat, men were shaking and women were crying, the more money they had on them, the harder they shook, the more they cried.

That Honest Monk still sat there with his head bowed, looking at his feet.

Suddenly, he saw another pair of feet, a pair of feet wearing a clean and thick pair of boots, standing right in front of him: "Your turn, hand it over!"

This Honest Monk did not seem to know what he was saying as he muttered: "What do you want me to hand over?"

"As long as it's worth money, hand it all over!"

"But I don't have anything on me." Honest Monk's head bowed even lower.

He noticed that this man seemed like he was going to kick him but was pulled back by another man: "Forget it, this nasty looking monk doesn't seem like the kind that would have money, let's get out of here."

They came quickly, and left quickly, for all criminals were all at least a little bit lacking in confidence.

All at once the inside of the boat became chaotic, some were jumping up and down, others were cursing, cursing not only at the bandits, but at the monk as well: "Seeing a monk really does bring bad luck!"

They did not seem to care that the monk could hear them curse, the Honest Monk didn't seem to hear them either.

He still sat there with his head bowed, his expression seemed very troubled, suddenly he jumped up and ran to the head of the boat. At the head of the boat there was a plank of wood, it was used as a bridge once the boat had docked.

The Honest Monk grabbed the plank of wood and gently hit it, the three inch thick plank of wood split into five or six pieces.

Everyone on the boat was shocked.

The Honest Monk tossed the first piece of wood out, the piece had just landed in water when he took off, the tip of his foot had just gently

landed on top of piece of wood when the second piece was tossed out.

He looked just like a dragonfly on the surface of a water, after four or five jumps on top of the water, he had chased down that get-away boat of the Water Snake Clan. The heroes of the Water Snake Clan were just counting up their earnings today when they noticed a man gently floating down onto the head of their boat like an angel, it was that nasty looking monk.

Not only had they never seen this kind of kungfu before, none of them had even heard of it before.

"So this monk was hiding himself, waiting until we had already gotten our hands on the money before he makes any trouble."

Every one of their hands was covered in cold sweat as they hoped that this monk only wanted their money and not their lives.

None of them could have imagined that the monk would suddenly kneel down in front of them and politely say: "I have four taels of silver on me, I originally intend to buy a new set of clothing and a new pair of straw sandals, that was already being greedy."

He took out the silver and laid it at their feet, and then he continued: "Besides, a monk should not lie, yet I just lied to you heroes, now I only beg for your forgiveness. When I go back I would definitely face the wall and think all this over in front of Buddha for at least three months to punish myself."

Every single one of them were shocked, none of them dared to say anything.

The Honest Monk's head was bowed as he said: "If heroes can't forgive me, then I have no choice but to kneel here."

Who would want a person like this on the boat?

Finally someone summed up his courage and said: "Alright, we... we... we forgive you."

That phrase was supposed to be said with assuring confidence, but when this person said it, his voice even changed pitch.

Happiness immediately appeared on the Honest Monk's face, (Dong! Dong! Dong!) he loudly kowtowed three times on the deck of the boat, slowly stood up, suddenly jumped 20 meters onto the shore, and just as suddenly he disappeared.

Everyone stood there shocked at the head of the boat, they could only look at each other, then look down at the silver.

After who knows how long, someone finally let out a deep sigh and declared his take: "You guys really think he is a monk?"

"What is he if he isn't a monk?"

"A saint, a real and genuine saint."

The next morning, someone discovered that Water Snake Clan suddenly

had 18 distinguished members die in their beds.

Every one of them seemed to die very peacefully, no wounds nor poison was found, nobody could figure out how they died.

Xi Men Chui Xue

Xi Men Chui Xue doesn't blow snow, he blows blood. Blood that's on his sword.

The water in the tub was still warm and still had a faint smell of Cape Jasmines. Xi Men Chui Xue had just taken a bath and washed his head, he had washed every part of his body clean.

Right now Xiao-Hong was brushing his hair, while Xiao-Cui and Xiao-Yu were cutting and polishing his nails.

Xiao-Yun had prepared a completely new set of clothes for him wear, they were all white from underclothes to socks, white like the snow.

They were all famous prostitutes in the city, all very pretty, very young, they all know how to please men-to please men in all kinds of ways.

But Xi Men Chui Xue only chose one kind. He never even touched them. He had fasted for three days.

Because he was about to set upon doing a thing that he believes is the most saintly thing in the world. He was going to kill a person! His name

was Hong Tao.

Xi Men Chui Xue didn't know the man, nor had he seen him before. Xi Men Chui Xue was going to kill him only because he killed Zhao Gang.

{“Chui” means blow, “Xue” means snow, but is the same sound as blood. This was a very clever play on words that does not translate over. }

Everyone knew that Zhao Gang was a very upright and very loyal man, a real man among men.

Xi Men Chui Xue knew that too, but he does not know Zhao Gang either, nor had he seen Zhao Gang before.

He had traveled thousands of kilometers, rode for three days straight under a blazing sun, arrived at this unfamiliar city, bathed, fasted for three days, only to avenge for a stranger he had never even met before by killing another stranger he had never met before.

Hong Tao stared at Xi Men Chui Xue, he couldn't believe there was a man like this in the world that will do this kind of thing.

Xi Men Chui Xue's clothes were white like the snow as he calmly stood there under the West Gate, calmly waiting for Hong Tao to pull out his sabre.

{“XiMen” means West Gate, so that whole phrase was a take off on Xi Men Chui Xue's name, yet another thing that does not translate over. }

Most of the people in the pugilistic world knew about Hong Tao's "Lighting Sabre". If his sabre wasn't really fast like lightning, "One Sabre Shaking the nine Prefectures" Zhao Gang would not have died by his sabre.

Hong Tao killed Zhao Gang for those six words: "One Sabre Shaking the nine Prefectures", six words, one life!

Xi Men Chui Xue only spoke five words in total!

Hong Tao asked why he had come, he only replied: "To kill you!"

Hong Tao then asked him "Why", he answered: "Zhao Gang!"

Hong Tao asked him: "Are a friend of Zhao Gang?" He only shook his head.

Hong Tao asked: "So you came all this way to kill me for a person that you have never met?" He only nodded.

He came to kill, not to talk.

The color on Hong Tao's face changed, he had figured out who this man was, he had heard of his sword skill and weird behavior.

Xi Men Chui Xue's behavior was indeed strange, his sword technique was just as strange.

When he decide to kill a person, he had already prepared himself for two possible outcome and only two! "Either you die, or I die!"

Now Hong Tao discovered that he was only left with these two outcomes, he already have no other choice.

The west winds blew through the street as the leaves slowly float down. In the yard inside the tall walls, a flock of crows suddenly took off and flew into the setting sun to the west. Hong Tao suddenly pulled out his sabre and with lightning speed attacked eight times.

Zhao Gang died under this "Jade Linked Lightning eight Strikes".

Shame that his "Jade Linked" was like any other sabre skill in the world, it has openings. Only a little opening.

So Xi Men Chui Xue only made one thrust, one thrust was enough to stab through Hong Tao's throat.

When he pulled the sword out, there was blood on the sword.

Xi Men Chui Xue gently blew on the sword, and then blood dripped off the point drop by drop, neatly dripping onto a yellow leaf on the ground.

When the leaf was picked up by the west winds, Xi Men Chui Xue had already disappeared into the dusk, disappeared with the west winds....

Hua Man Lou

Fresh flowers filled the building. Hua Man Lou always loved fresh flowers very much, just like how he loved life.

At dusk, he always liked to set by the window with the setting sun shining through, gently stroking flower petals that were soft like the lips of a lover and enjoying the flower fragrance that were sweet like a lover's breath. It's dusk right now, the setting sun was warm, the gentle breeze was tender.

The building was peaceful and quiet, he sat there by the window all by himself, his heart was filled with gratitude, gratitude towards the heavens for giving him life, letting him enjoy such a beautiful human life.

Just then, he heard a series of hurried steps on the stairs.

A 17 or 18 year old girl hurried ran up to stairs, her expression was one of panic, her breath was hurried as well.

Although she wasn't very beautiful, but she had a clever and lively pair of big and bright eyes, shame that right now her eyes were filled with unspeakable terror and panic. Hua Man Lou turned around and faced her.

He didn't recognize the girl, but he was very polite and seemed very caring: "Is something the matter, Miss?"

The girl caught her breath and answered: "Someone's chasing me, can I hide here for a bit?"

"Yes!" Hua Man Lou did not seem to think about his answer at all.

There was nobody downstairs, the front door's always open, obviously this girl came running in out of panic. But even if it was a wounded wolf running away from a hunter, he would have let it in just the same.

His door was always open, that's because no matter what kind of people came to him, he would welcome them just the same.

The eyes of the girl was looking around the room, seemingly looking for a safe place to hide.

Hua Man Lou tenderly assured her: "You don't need to hide anymore, as long as you are here, you are safe."

"Really" The girl blinked, as if she doesn't quite believe him. "Not only is the man chasing me mean and vicious, he has a sabre with him, he may kill people at anytime!"

Hua Man Lou smiled and replied: "I guarantee you he would not kill here."

Still not feeling assured, the girl was just about to ask him: "Why?"

But she did not have a chance to ask, the man chasing her had arrived inside the building and had ran up the stairs. He was exceptionally tall and big, yet he was very swift and nimble moving up the stairs.

He really did have a sabre in his hand, his eyes also had a knife-like ferocity to them, when he saw the girl he immediately shouted: "Now let's see where you can run off to."

The girl was just running to behind Hua Man Lou, Hua Man Lou was smiling: "Now that she's here, she doesn't need to run anymore."

The man shot a glance at him, seeing that he was nothing more than a handsome and refined-looking young man, he laughed at said: "Do you know who your old man is here? How dare you meddle in your old man's business!"

Hua Man Lou was still just as calm and polite: "Who are you?"

The man squared his shoulders and answered: "Your old man here is 'Flower Sabre King' Cui Yi Dong, I give you one chop, your body will gain one more hole.

{Yet another play on words, "Yi Dong" means one hole.}

Hua Man Lou replied: "So very sorry, I have never heard of your honorable name before, my body doesn't need any extra holes either, I don't want any more holes, big or small."

The girl could not help but let out a peal of laughter.

Cui Yi Dong's face has changed colors, suddenly he screamed: "You are going to get some even if you don't want any!"

He shook his sabre, while the sword flashes were still shaking, his sabre was already on its way towards Hua Man Lou's chest.

Hua Man Lou did not move his body at all, only two fingers.

He suddenly moved his hand, and the two finger came together on the sabre. That sabre seemed like it immediately grew root there between his fingers.

Cui Yi Dong pulled with all his might, but he still cannot pull the sabre out.

Hua Man Lou was still smiling: "If you are willing to leave your sabre here, I'll be sure to take very good care of it, my door is always open, you can come back any time to take it back."

Cui Yi Dong was covered in cold sweat, suddenly he stumped his foot on the floor, released the sabre, and ran down the stairs without even glancing back. He ran down much faster than he ran up.

Like a bell, the girl started laughing, she looked at Hua Man Lou with both admiration and surprise: "I never suspected that you have that great of an ability."

Hua Man Lou smiled and replied: "It's not that I have a great ability, it's that he doesn't have any!"

The girl replied: "Who says he doesn't have any? A lot of people in the martial world can't beat him, even me."

Huan Man Lou asked: "You?"

The girl answered: "Although I can't beat him, but there's also a lot of men that can't beat me, I am Shang Guan Fei Yan from south of the river."

She immediately shook her head at herself and sighed: "Of course you have never heard of that name before!"

Hua Man Lou walked over and gently placed the sabre in his hand onto a table by the wall, he suddenly turned around and asked: "Why was he chasing you?"

Shang Guan Fei Yan bit her lips and hesitated, finally she broke out into a smile and said: "Because I stole something of his."

Hua Man Lou was not surprised nor shocked, he actually laughed.

Shang Guan Fei Yan immediately followed it up: "Even though I'm a thief, but he's a bandit, I never steal from nice people, only from bandits."

She bowed her head down and peeked at Hua Man Lou out of the corner of her eye, then she spoke up: "I only hope that you don't look down at me, that you don't dislike me."

Hua Man Lou smiled: "I like you, I like people who tell the truth."

Shang Guan Fei Yan blinked: "Can people who tell the truth stay here a little longer?"

Hua Man Lou answered: "Of course."

Shang Guan Fei Yan seemed to have relaxed a bit sweetly replied: "Then I feel much better, I was really afraid that you might chase me out just then."

She walked over to the window and took a deep breath, the air was filled with the sweet smell of flowers. It was getting darker outside, but inside it had already gotten dark.

Shang Guan Fei Yan gently sighed: "Today past so quickly, it is already dark again."

Hua Man Lou replied with a simple "H'm"

Shang Guan Fei Yan asked: "Why haven't you lit the lamps?"

Hua Man Lou smiled and replied: "So sorry, I forgot I have a guest here."

Shang Guan Fei Yan asked: "You only light the lamps when you have guests?"

Hua Man Lou merely answered with another "H'm".

Shang Guan Fei Yan asked: "You don't light the lamps when you are by yourself?"

Hua Man Lou replied: "I don't need any lamp."

Shang Guan Fei Yan asked yet again: "Why?"

She had turned around, looking at Hua Man Lou with disbelief in her eyes.

But Hua Man Lou's expression was still very happy and calm as he slowly answered: "Because I am blind."

The twilight got even darker, the air was still filled with the sweet smell of flower fragrances.

But Shang Guan Fei Yan didn't notice any of it, she was completely shocked.

"Because I am blind."

Although there were only four very normal words, Shang Guan Fei Yan had never heard any phrase that shocked her more than these four words. She stared at Hua Man Lou, this man, who's filled with love for the life, who's filled with hope for the future, who could just casually press his fingers together onto a sabre that others were chopping down with all their might, who's living by himself in this little building, not only does he

not need anyone's help, but he's always prepared to gladly offer help to others.

Shang Guan Fei Yan could not believe that this man was blind. She could not help but ask again: "Are you really blind?"

Hua Man Lou nodded: "I have been blind since I was 7."

Shang Guan Fei Yan observed: "But you don't act like it."

Hua Man Lou smiled again: "How should a blind man act?"

Shang Guan Fei Yan didn't know how to reply. She had seen many blind people before, she had always thought that blind people were sad and dejected, because this beautiful and colorful world had turned to nothing but darkness to them.

Although she didn't say this, Hua Man Lou obviously understood what she meant. Still smiling, he said: "I know that you figured that blind people should not be as happy as I am."

Shang Guan Fei Yan could only admit it.

Hua Man Lou said: "Actually being blind is really not bad at all, although I can't see anymore, I can still hear and feel, sometimes I enjoy a lot more pleasure than others."

His face was filled with a glow of satisfaction that comes from

happiness as he slowly continued: "Have you ever heard the sound of snow falling on the roof? Can you feel that strange but wonderful power of life when the flower buds slowly blooming in the spring? Do you know that the Autumn winds often brings with it the sweet smells from trees and forests from hillsides far far away?...."

Shang Guan Fei Yan quietly listened to him talk, as if she was listening to a soft and beautiful song.

Hua Man Lou said: "If you are willing to look for them, you'll discovered how lovely and wonderful life is, every season has lots of unique pleasures and delights that can make you forget all your troubles and worries."

Shang Guan Fei Yan closed her eyes, suddenly she felt the wind become gentler and the flowers become sweeter.

Hua Man Lou continued: "Whether or not you are happy, has nothing to do with whether or not you are blind, but has everything to do with whether or not you really love your life and whether or not you really want to live on happily."

Shang Guan Fei Yan looked up at his peaceful but happy face that was glowing in the twilight. This time her eyes were not filled with shock and surprise, but with respect and gratitude.

She was grateful to him, not because he saved her life, but because he made her realize what it means to live.

She respect him, not because of his kungfu, but because of his incredible outlook and heart.

But she couldn't help but ask some more: "You don't have anyone else in your family?"

Hua Man Lou smiled: "I have a very large family, there are a lot of people in my family, everyone of them are very healthy and very happy."

Shang Guan Fei Yan asked: "Then why are you living here all by herself?"

Hua Man Lou replied: "Because I want to try and find out if I can live by myself. Because I don't want others to help me every step of the way, I don't want others to treat me as if I'm blind."

Shang Guan Fei Yan asked some more: "You... Are you really having a good time living here all by yourself?"

Hua Man Lou answered: "I have lived here for eight months now, and I have never been happier in my life."

Shang Guan Fei Yan gently sighed and asked: "But other than the snow in the winter and the flowers in the spring, what else do you have?"

Hua Man Lou replied: "I have great nights of sleep, a very good appetite, a very comfortable house, and a very good sounding old seven stringed-zither, all these are enough really. Besides, I also have a very good friend."

Shang Guan Fei Yan asked: "Who's your friend?"

Hua Man Lou's face was beaming again: "His surname is Lu, call him Lu Xiao Feng."

He smiled and continued: "But please don't assume he is a girl, although his name is Xiao Feng, little phoenix, he is a man in every way."

Shang Guan Fei Yan replied: "Lu Xiao Feng?... I think I have heard of that name before, but don't know what kind of person he is."

Hua Man Lou's smiled even wider: "He is a really strange fellow, all you have to do is take one look at him, then you'll never ever forget him, not only does he have two pairs of eyes and ears, three hands, he also grew four eyebrows."

Two pairs of eyes and ears, of course meant that he can see and hear a lot more and better than others.

Three hands probably meant that his hands were faster than anyone, very nimble and dexterous.

But what does "4 eyebrows" mean? Shang Guan Fei Yan couldn't figure that out.

She decided that no matter what she must think of a way to see this four eyebrowed Lu Xiao Feng.

Chapter 1 - The prettiest Boss' wife

The Boss's Wife sat on the opposite side, staring at his mustache. She really was a very beautiful woman, with her curved eye brows, her large eyes, and her delicate yet full lips, she looked just like a ripened honey, nobody could resist not taking a bite once catching a glimpse of her. But the most attractive and enticing thing about her was not her face, nor was it her body, but the style in which she carries herself.

Yellow Stoned Town is a big town. This street should be a very lavish and bustling street.

But now it was deep into the night, the new moon looked like a hook as it shined down onto the green slab stone street. Two horses carrying two men wearing green came galloping along, but there was no body on the street.

The man missing half his left ear and has a knife scar from the base of his left ear to the right corner of his mouth pulled his horse to a stop and asked in a heavy voice: "Do you think he would spend the night here?"

The purple faced man with a beard replied: "Yes!"

"He" is still a person, and "he" still had to sleep at night, it's just everybody knows that he has a problem with his sleeping habits.

The man with the scar asked: "If he was going to stay, where would he stay?"

The purple faced man didn't even have to think about it: "Vernal Greetings."

"Vernal Greetings" has the most pretty girls. "He" always has to sleep with a woman present somewhere, that was his problem. Everyone has some kind of a problem or another.

The big lantern by the front door of Vernal Greetins was still lit, red-colored glow enticing everyone to come and enjoy a red-colored night. The door was half open. The purple faced man gave his horse one jerk on the reins and the two of them smashed through the door.

A skinny, yellow-looking man was sleeping on the bamboo chair in the yard. The whip in the purple faced man's hand suddenly wrapped around that man's neck as he ferociously shouted: "Did a man wearing red cape come in tonight?"

This man was nearly choked out of breath, all he could do was nodded feverishly. The purple faced man finally let him down and asked: "Is he still here?"

Trying to catch his breath, that man nodded again.

The purple faced man asked: "Where is he?"

That man answered: "He was just drinking it up with four people in Peach Flower Hall, the four of them were toasting him in turns, finally getting him drunk."

The man with the scar's expression changed: "Which four people?"

That man answered: "Four very mean looking ones, but they seem to be very polite to him."

The man with the scar asked: "Where are they now?"

That man answered: "I saw them help him into his room, I think they are still in his room!"

The purple faced man had already turned his horse and charged toward the peach garden to the left. The lights in the Peach Flower Hall were still lit. The cups and dishes on the tables in Peach Flower Hall were a mess, there were three or four empty wine jugs lying about as well.

The man with the scar jumped and somersaulted in the air, he ran right up and kicked open the door at the back of the hall. He stood there in shock.

There were only four men in the room, kneeling down in a row. At first their faces were all white and pale, but seeing the man with the scar, suddenly their faces turned bright red.

The four of them had on lavish clothing, normally they would look very stylish. But someone had doodled on their faces. The first one had a tortoise drawn on his forehead, there were four words to go along with it on his face as well: "I am a tortoise".

The second one had a turtle: "I am a turtle".

Third one: "I am a pig".

Fourth one: "I am a dog".

The man with the scar just stood there, looking at them, looking at the drawings and words on their faces. Suddenly he bursted out laughing, laughing so hard that he doubled-over, as if he had never seen anything so funny in his whole life.

The four men gritted their teeth and stared at him, their eyes were filled with hatred and anger, as if they would jump up and tear him to pieces at any moment. But they were still properly kneeling there, not only couldn't they jump up, they couldn't even move an inch.

Still laughing hard, the man with the scar shouted: "When did the famed Four Heroes of Jiang Dong' turn into tortoise, turtle, pig, and dog?"

The purple faced man had already ran outside in laughter. He clapped his hands and shouted at the top of his lungs: "Everyone is welcomed to witness the might of the world famous four Heroes of Jiang Dong! Ten tael of silver to anyone that comes in, no matter who he is!"

The faces of the four men kneeling on the floor suddenly turned white, so much so that they almost looked clear. Sweat dropped down from the forehead like rain.

Still laughing, the man with the scar commented: "Even though that guy is still a bastard, at least he's a good bastard."

The purple faced man agreed: "At least this trip wasn't in vain."

Suddenly the two of them stopped laughing, for they saw another person walking in with her head lowered.

She was at most 14 or 15. Even though she was covered in makeup and jewelry, her face was still the cute and lovable like a little kid. With her head lowered, she lightly asked: "Are you two gentlemen looking for Mr. Lu?"

The face of the man with the scar darkened as he asked: "How did you know?"

The little girl weaking spoke: "Mr. Lu seemed just a little bit ago like he was drunk out of his mind, I happened to be sitting beside him, so I secretly drank two cups for him."

The man with the scar sneered: "This guy really does have some pretty good luck with women!"

The little girl blushed and rebuked: "Well I wouldn't know anything about that! Then he suddenly sobered up, he told me that I had a good heart and that's why he's going to give me one thing to sell to you two."

The purple faced man immediately probed: "What did he give you?"

The girl replied: "A... A sentence."

The purple faced man frowned: "A sentence? What kind of sentence?"

The girl replied: "He said this sentence is worth at least 300 taels of silver, he also said that you two gentlemen have to pay before I can tell you this sentence."

She also seemed to feel that this matter was preposterous. Before she finished talking, her faced got even redder.

But the purple faced man did not even hesitate, immediately grabbing out three banknotes worth 100 taels of silver each and tossing them on the table in front of the girl. He said: "Alright, I'll buy that sentence of yours."

The girl's eyes were wide open, staring at the three banknotes, not believing that there was such a man in this world, actually willing to pay 300 taels of silver for one sentence.

The purple faced man instructed: "Come over here and whisper it to me, don't let those four animals in there overhear it."

The girl hesitated a bit before finally walking up the man and whispering in his ear: "He said: 'If you want to find me, first find the boss's wife.'"

The purple faced man frowned, he couldn't understand what the sentence meant. There were countless number of boss's wife in the world, every shop or store has a boss's wife. How was he going to find a

particular one?

The girl suddenly added: "He said that if you don't understand this sentence, he could offer up another sentence as a hint. He said that this particular boss's wife is the prettiest in the world."

The purple faced man stood there for a moment. Then, not saying another word, he simply gestured to his companion and started to walk out. The man with the scar followed him. He suddenly turned around, grabbed an empty wine jug, and tossed it. The empty jug neatly landed on the head of the second man, the jug was green in color.

The man with the scar bursted out laughing: "Now that looks like a real turtle!"

There was still quite a few pretty boss's wife in the world, which one's the prettiest?

The man with the scar frowned: "Does this guy want us to go into every shop and store and compare every single one of the boss's wives?"

The purple faced man simply replied: "No."

The man with the scar asked: "Do you have some other plan?"

The purple faced man thought for a bit and said: "I think I might have figured out what he meant."

The man with the scar asked: "What did he mean?"

The purple faced man suddenly laughed: "Did you forget what Zhu Ting's nickname is?"

The man with the scar bursted out laughing again: "Look like I have to get an empty wine jug for him as well."

Zhu Ting never ran any kind of business before, nor has he owned any stores. Because he believes that no matter what kind of business or store you open, it will be hard not to have at least some time where you lose money. He could never take that kind of a risk.

Actually there's another very important reason why he never opened any business, because he never had enough money to open a business. But his nickname just happened to be "The Boss".

Zhu Ting was a man that understood enjoyment very well, and he's also open minded about anything. When these two reasons come together, it just makes him fatter and fatter.

Fat people always looked like they have good luck, and only those with good luck can be bosses, so a lot of people call him Boss. In reality, he really does have a lot of luck. Although he was not very handsome, he has a very beautiful wife; he never did one serious thing in his life, yet he's always managed to live in a most comfortable kind of homes, wear the best kind of clothes, and drink the best kind of wine.

There's another thing about himself that he's very proud of—he had always believed that he was even lazier than Lu Xiao Feng. Once you take one look at him sitting in that big and comfortable chair, you would know that there aren't many things that can make him get up out of it. Because no matter what kind of thing he's about to do, he would always “stop” and think about it for a bit.

To an open minded man, there is nothing in the world that has to be done once he thinks about it for a bit.

He's able to live such comfortably because, and only because, of his very skilled pair of hands that can make all kinds of weird stuff. If you can imagine it, he can build it. Once he bet with somebody that he can build a wooden man that could walk. He won 50 swallow-feathered mats and 50 jugs of aged wine, causing him to gain another five catties worth of flesh.

Right now he's trying to figure out how to build a kite big enough to carry a man. In the past he had wanted to look and see what was below the ground, now he wants to go up into the sky.

It was just then that he heard hoofbeats outside, then he saw the two men dressed in green. This time the man with the scar didn't kick the door open, it was open to begin with.

As soon as he rushed in he glared at Zhu Ting and shouted: “Where's the Boss's wife?”

Zhu Ting casually replied: “If you want to find the boss's wife, then you

should go to that convenient store across the way, she's in there."

That man with the scar replied: "There's one here too, you are called the Boss, so your wife is the Boss's wife."

Zu Ting laughed: "If the Boss's wife here knew that there were men from the Green Shirt Pavilion searching just for her, she would undoubtedly feel very fortunate." He recognized these two men.

"Green Shirt Pavilion" was not a pavilion, it was 108 pavilions, each with 108 men, a huge and powerful organization. Not only were they powerful, they were also very secretive. So if they wanted to do something, only very rarely do they fail to do it.

These two men were men with portraits in the first pavilion of the Green Shirt Pavilion. Nobody knows where the first pavilion is located, nobody had ever seen the 108 portraits. But everybody knows that if someone can have a portrait in it, then he can pretty much do as he please around the martial world.

That man with a scar was called "Iron Faced Judge". It's rumored that when someone chopped down on his face with a sabre, the blade was destroyed, that's how the name "Iron Faced" came to be. The other man was known as "Soul Hooker", for he had hooked a lot of souls with that pair of silver hooks of his.

Zhu Ting casually continued: "It's a pity that she is attending to some very important matter right now, probably don't have any time to meet you guys."

Iron Faced Judge asked: "What kind of important matter?"

Zhu Ting answered: "She's drinking wine with a friend. Isn't drinking it up with your friend the most important thing in the world?"

Iron Faced Judge asked: "Does that friend of yours have Lu for his surname?"

Zhu Ting's face suddenly darkened: "You'd better get this straight, that man named Lu is her friend, not mine."

Iron Faced Judge asked: "Where are they drinking?"

Zhu Ting answered: "Probably at that Clear Cloud Inn that the guy's staying at."

Iron Faced Judge looked him over a couple of times, suddenly a poisonous smile appeared on his face: "Your wife is in a hotel, drinking it up with a famed womanizer, and yet you can still sit here?"

Zhu Ting casually answered: "Kids have to pee, wives have to cheat, these kinds of things nobody can control. What can I do if I can't just sit here? Climb onto the roof and do somersaults? Roll onto the floor and crawl?"

Iron Faced Judge bursted out laughing again: "I admire you, you are one open-minded fellow."

He laughs heartily as often as possible, because he knows that when he laughs he look even more terrifying. When he laughs that scar on his face would suddenly quiver and he would look even more hideous than ghosts in an abandoned temple.

Zhu Ting stared at him: "Do you have a wife?"

Iron Faced Judge answered: "No."

Zhu Ting laughed and lazily said: "If you have a wife as beautiful as mine, you would be open-minded too."

Lu Xiao Feng was lying on the bed, a big cup filled to the brim with wine sat neatly on his chest.

The only reason that no wine spilled out was because he was just lying there, without the slightest of movements, almost like a dead person. He did not even open his eyes once all this while. His eyebrows were thick, his eye lashes were long, and just above his lips he kept a mustache, a very well trimmed mustache.

The Boss's Wife sat on the opposite side, staring at his mustache. She really was a very beautiful woman, with her curved eye brows, her large eyes, and her delicate yet full lips, she looked just like a ripened honey, nobody could resist not taking a bite once catching a glimpse of her. But the most attractive and enticing thing about her was not her face, nor was it her body, but the style in which she carries herself.

If you were a man, you would be interested in this kind of woman.

But at this moment she seemed to be quite interested in that mustache of Lu Xiao Feng's, after staring at it for a long time, she suddenly let out a peal of laughter: "That mustache of yours really does look just like that pair of eye brows of yours, no wonder everyone keeps on saying that you have four eyebrows."

It was like a flower blooming when she laughed: "Those who have never met you before could never guess that you have a pair of eyebrows on your lips."

Lu Xiao Feng still did not move, suddenly he sucked, the cup that was on his chest was sucked toward his lips, the wine that filled the cup was sucked into his mouth, and "Gulp!" They were gone. He then blew, the cup returned to its original position.

The Boss's Wife laughed again: "Are you drinking or doing magic tricks?"

Lu Xiao Feng, with his eyes still shut, did not reply, merely pointing at the empty cup sitting on his chest.

The Boss's Wife had no choice but to fill the cup for him again, but she couldn't help but comment: "You wanted me to come here and drink with you, then why are you just lying there like a dead man and not even looking at me?"

Lu Xiao Feng finally spoke: "I'm scared to look at you."

The Boss's Wife probed further: "Why?"

Lu Xiao Feng answered: "I'm scared that you'll seduce me."

The Boss's Wife bit her lips: "You purposely gave others the impression that there's something going on between you and me, and yet you are afraid that I might seduce you, what are you really doing all this for?"

Lu Xiao Feng replied: "For your husband!"

The Boss's Wife was surprised: "For him? You really think he likes being a live turtle?"

Lu Xiao Feng responded: "Being a live turtle is still better than being a dead one!"

He did not gave the Boss's Wife a chance to cut in before continuing: "In the profession he is in, someone might try and kill you at anytime and anywhere. He really has met too many people and know too many secrets!"

The Boss's Wife couldn't argue with this point, Zhu Ting really had done a lot of secret and strange things for a lot of people. Although they knew that his lips are tight, but who's lips could be tighter than those of a dead man? To kill in order to keep their secrets, that is the kind of thing that these kind of people could do at any given moment.

Lu Xiao Feng continued: "After he's killed, I doubt very much that you would stay a widow for a year!"

The Boss's Wife raised her eyebrows and sneered: "What kind of person do you take me for? Fan Jin Lian?"

Lu Xiao Feng casually replied: "Even if you are Fan Jin Lian, I'm not Xi Men Qing!"

{This little exchange involve portion of the story from the Heroes of the Water Margins, one of the four Classics of Chinese Literature about a married woman and another man.}

The Boss's Wife stared at him; suddenly, she got up, turned around, and started to walk out. Lu Xiao Feng still lied there, not moving at all, not even having the slightest inclination to pull her back.

But just as the Boss's Wife walked out of the door, she immediately stormed back in and stood there at the head of the bed, hands on her hips. "You really think that I don't know what you are trying to do? You think I'm a retard?"

Lu Xiao Feng replied: "You're not?"

The Boss's Wife replied, louder than she needed to: "You got in a fight with him, yet you are still afraid that his life may be in danger, that's why you want others to think that there's something going on between you and me; for if I wanted 'prove' my 'innocence' I cannot let myself become

a widow, of course I have to beg you to protect him. With you protecting him, then others would have to think things over if they really wanted to kill him."

Her anger was rising, as was the volume of her voice: "But did you ever think about me? Why do I have to carry this stinking dark cloud around with me for?"

Lu Xiao Feng replied: "For your husband!"

The Boss's Wife suddenly couldn't come up with a reply. Sacrificing a little bit for her husband is something that a wife should do.

Lu Xiao Feng casually added: "That's why as long as your husband trusts you, you do not have to think or even care about what others think!"

The Boss's Wife bit her lips and stood there blankly for a while before finally, unable to stop herself from asking, she asked: "Do you really think he trusts me?"

Lu Xiao Feng responded: "He's not stupid!"

The Boss's Wife stared at him: "But does he trust you in the same way?"

Lu Xiao Feng lazily sighed: "Why don't you ask him that question instead of me?"

He sucked in again and drank down the wine in the cup that was resting on his chest, he muttered to himself: "If those guys from the Green Shirt Pavilion aren't that stupid, they should be here soon, so you really should leave soon!"

The Boss's Wife suddenly looked worried: "They really are searching for you, but what for?"

Lu Xiao Feng casually replied: "I wanted to ask them that too, or else I would not have let them find me!"

Zhu Ting sat in that lazy chair of his, lost in his thoughts, whatever weird or strange thoughts or ideas they may be. All those weird and strange contraptions and gadgets came about this way.

The Boss's Wife gracefully walked in, holding a handkerchief with two fingers, and, twisting seductively, walked by him twice. Zhu Ting didn't seemed to have noticed.

The Boss's Wife couldn't not control herself anymore: "I'm back!"

Zhu Ting replied: "So I see!"

The Boss's Wife purposely put on a very mysterious expression: "I just drank down a lot of wine with Xiao Feng, so much that I'm still a little tipsy right now!"

Zhu Ting replied: "I know!"

The Boss's Wife blinked a couple of times: "But other than drinking, we didn't do anything else!"

Zhu Ting replied: "I know!"

The Boss's Wife suddenly began to shout: "You know sh1t!"

Zhu Ting replied: "Actually, I don't know anything about sh1t!"

The Boss's Wife's temper picked up again as she loudly inquired: "I have just spend a huge chunk of time drinking with another man in his room, not only are you not jealous or angry, you can still stay here wondering about God knows what?"

Zhu Ting replied: "I don't wonder about things, that's why I'm not jealous or angry."

The Boss's Wife put her hands on her hips again: "A man like him, a woman like me, together in a small room, is it possible that we were completely respectable the entire time?"

She sneered and continued: "Who do you think he is? A saint? Liu Xia Hui?"

Zhu Ting smiled: "I know he is a big a\$\$h01e, but I trust him!"

The Boss's Wife got even angrier: "You are not angry or jealous because you trust him, and not because you trust me?"

Zhu Ting responded: "Of course I trust you!"

The Boss's Wife rebuked: "But you trust him more!"

Zhu Ting replied: "Don't forget that we knew each other all the way back when we were both still wearing diapers!"

The Boss's Wife sneered: "So you guys have been friends for 20 or 30 years, then how come you guys suddenly seemed to have turned to life long enemies, not even saying one word to each other!"

Zhu Ting casually replied: "Because he's a big asshole, and I'm a big asshole too!"

The Boss's Wife stared at him before finally letting out a burst of laughter, shaking her head and laughing, she said: "The things that the two of you big assholes do, not only can't I figure them out, I get more confused the more I try."

Zhu Ting responded: "Of course you can't figure out the things that big assholes do, you are not a big asshole!"

The Boss's Wife sweetly smiled and said: "At last, something that makes sense from you!"

Zhu Ting smiled a bit and casually added: "The most that you are is a small a\$\$h01e, a very, very small a\$\$h01e!"

Lu Xiao Feng's eyes were still shut as he was still lying there on the bed, with a cup full of wine sitting on his chest. This cup was poured by the Boss's Wife just before she left. He would never have gotten up out of bed just for a cup of wine.

This bed was soft and comfortable, there's not that many people left in the world that could get him out of this bed right now. His red cape was hanging off the hanger by the head of the bed. For some unknown reason, no matter when and where, he always carry a cape like this around with him. All you would had to see was this red cape and you would know that he was close by.

Iron Faced Judge and Soul Hooker had spotted the red cape at this moment, they saw it through the window. Then the two of them jumped in through the window, all the way to the head of the bed, staring down at Lu Xiao Feng.

Lu Xiao Feng was still lying there like a dead man, not a bit of reaction or movement, not even, it seemed, to be breathing.

Iron Faced Judge asked viciously: "Are you Lu Xiao Feng?" No response.

Soul Hooker frowned, and coldly observed: "I suppose this man's dead!"

Iron Faced Judge sneered: "Very likely, this kind of man can't live long to begin with!"

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly opened his eyes, shot a look at them, immediately closed his eyes again, and then started mumbling: "Strange, I could have sworn I just saw two men in the room!"

Iron Faced Judge loudly replied: "That's because there are two men in the room!"

Lu Xiao Feng asked: "If there really are two men in the room, then how come I didn't hear knocking a little bit earlier?"

Soul Hooker replied: "That's because we didn't knock."

Lu Xiao Feng opened his eyes again and looked at them, he suddenly asked: "Are you two really human?"

Iron Faced Judge angrily replied: "What are we if we are not human? Live ghosts?"

Lu Xiao Feng casually declared: "Humans knock before they enter a room, only wild dogs jump in through the window!"

Soul Hooker's face changed color as he suddenly cracked his whip. Not only was he one of the four top double-hooked martial artist this side of the Great Wall, his kungfu and skills with this snake skin whip of his wasn't

all that bad either. It's been rumored that he could smash a walnut that's resting on top of three pieces of tofu.

Obviously, Lu Xiao Feng is a whole lot bigger than a walnut, not to mention the fact that he's lying there on the bed like a dead man in front of him, so there was no way that this move was going to fail. But who knew that Lu Xiao Feng would suddenly raise his hand and skillfully snatch his whip between two of his fingers like an old beggar snatching fleas.

He didn't learn this move from Hua Man Lou, he taught it to Hua Man Lou.

The expression on Soul Hooker's face was just like that of Cui Yi Dong's when his sabre was caught, a flash of green, then white, and finally turning to red. He summoned up all the strength in his body, but he still could not rip the whip out between Lu Xiao Feng's fingers.

Lu Xiao Feng was still comfortably lying there, not a drop of wine in the cup that was sitting on his chest had been spilled.

Iron Faced Judge saw all this on the side with a astonished expression on his face, suddenly he burst out laughing and said: "Excellent, excellent kungfu indeed! Lu Xiao Feng really is as good as the rumors say."

Soul Hooker suddenly burst out laughing as well as he let go of the whip: "This time I made sure that this Lu Xiao Feng is the real deal!"

Iron Faced Judge added: "In this day and age, the number of fakers in

the martial world increases every day, so our friend Lu here really shouldn't blame us for making sure."

In a couple of exchanges, the two of them helped themselves out of an awkward position, but Lu Xiao Feng seemed like he had just fallen asleep again.

Soul Hooker gradually found it difficult to keep laughing as he lightly coughed twice and said: "I take it that our friend Lu already knows who we are!"

He seemed to be reminding Lu Xiao Feng not to forget that anyone in the "Green Shirt Pavilion" wasn't someone to be messed with.

Iron Faced Judge spoke up: "We only came because we were ordered to invite our friend Lu take a trip back with us, not only are we responsible for inviting and sending you off, but we are to make sure that not a single sweat hair of yours is to be harmed."

Lu Xiao Feng finally lazily let out a sigh: "Why should I go back with you? Not like your boss's wife would keep me company in bed!"

Iron Faced Judge's face darkened as he replied coldly: "We don't have a boss's wife there, but there's one here!"

Lu Xiao Feng's face darkened as well: "Since you guys already knew about this, then you should go back and tell that guy named Wei in your mansion that it's best if he does not bother Zhu Ting, or else I'll burn down all 108 of you guys's masions!"

Iron Faced Judge sneered: "If we killed Zhu Ting, we probably would be helping you wouldn't we?"

Lu Xiao Feng casually replied: "Haven't you guys ever heard before? I have never liked widows."

Iron Faced Judge replied: "Just as long as you agree to go with us, I promise you that the Boss's Wife would not be a widow any time soon."

Just as he finished saying this, there came a knock on the door. Nobody outside was knocking on the door, the person that knocked was somehow already in the room.

He didn't use his hands to knock either, because he didn't have a hand.

Dusk again.

The setting sun shone through the window and neatly onto this man's face. It couldn't really be considered a face.

Half of the left side of his face had been sliced away, the wound had shriveled up when it healed itself, pulling his nose and eyes over to that side - not one single nose, but half of one, and not a pair of eyes, but just one.

A dark and deep hole was all that's left of his right eye, there was a huge cross-like scar on his cheek, both of his hands had been cut off at the wrist, on his right wrist was a cold and menacing hook, and on his left wrist there was a huge iron ball which was larger than a human head. When compared to this guy, Iron Faced Judge suddenly seemed like a handsome, suave playboy.

Right now he was standing inside the door and gently knocking the door with the iron hook on his right wrist as he said coldly: "I'm not a wild dog, I'm human, so when I enter other people's rooms, I always knock!"

Once he started talking, the half of his face that was sliced off would start twitching, as if he was crying, but also as if he was laughing. Upon seeing his man, even Iron Faced Judge couldn't help but shudder a little. He actually had not noticed how this man had entered.

Soul Hook had already taken two steps back as he blurted out: "Liu Yu Hen?"

A laugh that sounded like rusted blades grinding up against each other came from this man's throat: "There's actually someone in this world that actually still recognize me, so hard to come by these a days."

Iron Faced Judge looked shocked: "You are that 'Handsome Gentleman' Liu Yu Hen?"

This kind of man was actually known as "Handsome Gentleman"?

But this man actually nodded as he quietly and sadly replied: "'Feelings

are always like leftover hatred, no point in bring up past matters.'
'Handsome Gentleman' is dead, pity that Liu Yu Hen is still alive."

{Yu Hen means leftover hatred, a play on words.}

Iron Faced Judge's expression changed: "Why... why did you come here?"

He seemed to have an unspeakable fear towards this man, so much so that even his voice changed.

Liu Yu Hen coldly replied: "Liu Yu Hen wanted to die 10 years ago, but somehow he is still alive today, I only came here asking for death."

Iron Faced Judge asked: "Why would I kill you?"

Liu Yu Hen replied: "Because if you don't kill me, I'll kill you..."

Iron Faced Judge was shocked. Soul Hooker's face was turning green.

It was at this time that there came another knock on the door.

This time the person that knocked was outside, but suddenly he walked in, he walked in without opening the door.

That thick wooden door was like a thin piece of paper in front of him!

He did not smash the door using an object nor did he kick the door using his foot, he just casually walked forward and the door just suddenly shattered to pieces. But he did not have a single bit of roughness in his appearance, he actually looked like a refined and gentle scholar, that white and clean face of his always had a smile on it.

Right now, he was smiling as he spoke: "I'm human too, I also knocked."

Iron Faced Judge suddenly noticed that even when he smiled, there was a sharp and knife-like murderous look in his eyes.

Soul Hooker took two more steps back and blurted out again: "Xiao Qiu Yu!"⁷

{Qiu Yu means autumn rains, yet another play on words.}

This man smiled: "Excellent, friend, your knowledge is impressive!"

Iron Faced Judge was shocked again: "'Intestine Breaking Swordsman' Xiao Qiu Yu?"

This man nodded and sighed: "'The autumn rains and autumn winds brings worries', so whenever someone is killed, I worry."

Iron Faced Judge couldn't help but ask: "What kind of worries?"

Xiao Qiu Yu casually replied: "Right now I'm worried because I can't decide whether I should kill you or I should let Brother Liu kill you."

Iron Faced Judge suddenly burst out laughing, but his laughter seemed to be stuck in his throat, even he thought it sounded a bit like crying.

Soul Hooker was in even worse shape as he kept on look around the room, as if he was searching for a way out.

Suddenly, a man spoke up while laughing: "What are you looking for? That pair of silver hook of yours?"

This guy was standing outside the window, his face was thin and black and his stature was short, but he kept a fire-like beard that covered most of his face, there was a pair of hooks in his hands, Soul Hooker's hooks. He smiled and said: "I have brought your silver hooks here for you; here, take it!"

When he said "it", he gently pushed his hand forward and the pair of hooks slowly began to fly towards Soul Hooker, ridiculously slow, as if there was a pair of invisible hands underneath them.

Even Iron Faced Judge recognized this man as he blurted out: "'Forever Loner' Du Gu Fang?"

Du Gu Fang also nodded: "I rarely ever enter someone else's room, but this time I'll make an exception!" When he finished, he had disappeared. He suddenly appeared at the door and knocked on the broken door; just as the sound of knocking could be heard, he suddenly reappeared outside of the window and suddenly jumped in through the window; smiling, he said: "I'm human too, I also knock."

The door was obviously in pieces, yet he still went and knocked; after knocking, he still went and jumped in through the window.

Soul Hooker had already caught his hooks as he suddenly viciously shouted: "Are you here to trouble us too?"

Du Gu Fang casually replied: "I don't kill wild dogs, I only watch others kill."

He actually grabbed a chair and sat down, sat down right by the window. The sky got even redder outside of the window. Lu Xiao Feng was still lying comfortably in his bed, as if no matter what happens here had nothing whatsoever to do with him.

He knew about Liu Yu Hen, Xiao Qiu Yu, and Du Gu Fang. There's probably not that many people in the martial world that didn't know about them, but there are even less people that could make Lu Xiao Feng get out of bed right now. He seemed to be determined to stay and slack off in this bed.

Liu Yu Hen, Xiao Qiu Yu, and Du Gu Fang might not be the weirdest characters in the martial world, but they weren't that far away. But now they actually came together and shown up here, what's all this for?

Although his face was looking very green, Soul Hooker still sneered and said: "Green Shirt Pavilion has not had any troubles nor grudges with you three gentleman, so why are you guys coming to trouble us today?"

Xiao Qiu Yu replied: "Because I felt like it!"

He smiled and continued: "I have always killed whoever I wanted whenever I felt like it, I felt like killing you two today, so I came to kill you!"

Soul Hooker shot a look at Iron Faced Judge and slowly asked: "What if you don't feel like it?"

Xiao Qiu Yu replied: "When I don't feel like it, even if you got on your knees and begged I wouldn't lift a finger!"

Soul Hooker sighed; just as he did, Iron Faced Judge jumped forth and somersaulted, with his pair iron judge pens in hand aimed right at Liu Yu Hen's Sudden Sky and Greeting Fragrance pressure points. His moves weren't fancy, but they were accurate, fast, and effective!

But Liu Yu Hen did not even seem to notice that pair of judge pens! He instead took a step forward. "Ba!" The pair of iron judge pens had simultaneously stabbed into Liu Yu Hen's shoulder and chest. But the iron ball attached to his left wrist also landed on Iron Faced Judge's face.

Iron Faced Judge's face suddenly split open. He didn't even mutter a single sound before crumpling down, but the hook on Liu Yu Hen's right wrist hooked onto him and prevented him from dropping onto the floor.

The pair of judge pens were still imbedded in Liu Yu Hen, although they didn't hit the pressure points yet, they were still in very deep. Liu Yu Hen did not even seem to feel them as he only coldly stared at where Iron

Faced Judge's face used to be on his head; he suddenly said coldly: "Turns out that this face wasn't made of iron."

A flick of the hook and Iron Faced Judge went flying out of the window, out to meet the real Judge.

It was at this time that pair of silver hooks that belonged to Soul Hooker flew out of the window as well. But he was still inside the room, his face was gray, his arms were drooping down, the joints on both arms were bleeding profusely. Blood was also dripping off of the little sword in Xiao Qiu Yu's hand.

He smiled, looked at Soul Hooker, and said: "Looks like you won't ever be able to hook anymore souls with that pair of arm of yours!"

Soul Hooker gritted his teeth, so much so that there was a audible grinding sound in the room, suddenly he screamed: "Why aren't you killing me!"

Xiao Qiu Yu casually replied: "Because now I don't feel like killing you, now I want you to go back and tell the people in your mansion that they better stay in that mansion of theirs and not come out for the next two months, or else they will find it very difficult to return to the mansion alive."

The expression on Soul Hooker's face changed a couple of times as he did not say another word and started heading out the door.

Unexpectedly, Du Gu Fang suddenly appeared in front of him and said

coldly: "You came in through the window, it's best if you left through the window as well!"

Soul Hooker stared at him viciously before finally stumping his foot. The two men that entered through the window both exited through the window as well.

Liu Yu Hen was staring at the darkening sky outside the window, lost in his thoughts, that pair of judge pens were still imbedded in him.

Xiao Qiu Yu walked over and gently pulled them out, seeing the blood pouring out from his chest, a bit of sympathy came from that pair of stone cold eyes of his.

Liu Yu Hen suddenly deeply sighed: "Pity... such a pity..."

Xiao Qiu Yu asked: "Pity that you didn't die this time?"

Liu Yu Hen did not respond!

Xiao Qiu Yu deeply sighed too: "Why are you doing this to yourself?..."

Du Gu Fang suddenly sighed too: "You break other people's intestines, but he breaks his own!"

Someone had died in the room and the room itself was a mess, Lu Xiao Feng was still motionless, as if he didn't see any of this. What's even weirder is that the three men didn't seem to have seen him either, as if there wasn't a man lying on the bed.

The room had become dark. They were just quietly and peacefully standing there in the dark, nobody spoke up, but nobody left either. It was at this moment that sounds of music came drifting in with the night wind, beautiful sounds as if made in heaven.

Du Gu Fang's spirit seemed to have suddenly picked up as he said in a serious voice: "They're here!"

Who's here? Who could make such beautiful music?

Lu Xiao Feng was listening too, nobody can resist not listening to this kind of music. He suddenly noticed that the room that was filled with the smell of spilled blood suddenly was filled with a sweet fragrance. A fragrance sweeter than the smell of flowers came drifting in with the wind along with the music, in a blink of an eye the world seemed to be filled with this amazing fragrance.

Then this dark room suddenly lit up as well.

Lu Xiao Feng finally could not resist opening his eyes, he suddenly noticed that flower petals filled the air. Fresh flower of all kinds were drifting in with the wind through the window and the door before gently landing onto the floor. A carpet made of fresh flowers seemed to have suddenly appeared on the floor, stretching all the way out of the door.

A person came walking in through the door.

Lu Xiao Feng had seen a lot of women, some very ugly, some very pretty. But he had never seen a woman this beautiful.

She was wearing a soft, pure black robe that draped all the way down onto the floor, onto the fresh flowers. Her ebony black hair fell onto her shoulders, yet her face was white, her dark pupils were so dark that they shone. No other accessories, no other colors. She was just standing like that on the flowers, but the bright and color flowers on the floor seemed to have suddenly lost all their colors.

This kind of beauty was not of this world, it was something much higher, something that boggles the mind.

Liu Yu Hen, Xiao Qiu Yu, and Du Gu Fang had all quietly moved over to the corner of the room, their face filled with respect.

Lu Xiao Feng felt as if he was about to stop breathing. But he still had not gotten up.

The girl in black quietly stared at him, her pupils were clear and pure like the spring dew drops on the rose petals at dawn. Her voice was also soft as the wind, like the spring wind that blew across the lakes in the faraway mountains at dusk. But her smile was mysterious, mysterious like the sound of the flute that drift in from faraway in the middle of a quiet and peaceful night, drifting and distant, making it impossible for anyone to nail down. She stared at Lu Xiao Feng, smiling, suddenly she kneeled, as if a cloud in the sky suddenly came drifting down into the mortal world.

Lu Xiao Feng could not stay in bed any longer. He suddenly jumped up. It was as if he suddenly became an arrow that was on a fully pulled bow, he broke through the top of the bed curtains; followed by a "Bang!" as he broke through the roof.

Moon light came shining in through the hole in the roof he had just made, but he was nowhere to be seen.

A very cute and honest looking young girl with big, round eyes was standing at the side of the girl in black, standing on the flowers.

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly running for his life as if he saw a ghost gave this girl quite a scare as she couldn't help but quietly ask: "Her highness was so polite and proper towards him, why in the world is he running? What is he afraid of?"

The girl in black did not answer this question. She slowly stood up, gently stroking those soft, cloud like hair of hers and a strange expression appeared out of that pair of bright and shining eyes of hers; only after a long while did she finally whisper: "He really is a smart man, one of the smartest men in the world!"

Chapter 2 - The Richest Man

The wine cup was still in Lu XiaoFeng's hand, but most of the wine that was in the cup had, by now, spilled onto his clothing.

When he entered Old Man Huo's little house, Old Man Huo was drinking wine as well.

This was a very simple little wooden cabin, standing all by itself in the middle of a little wood comprised of jujube date trees on the side of a mountain.

Old Man Huo was just like this little wooden cabin, small, alone, clean, and steadfast, looking just like a hard shelled nut that had weathered many a storms. He just happened to be drinking at a small yet delicate table.

The wine smelled delicious, the room was filled with wine jugs of all types and all sizes, and by the looks of it they're all high quality wine.

When he saw the wine cup in Lu XiaoFeng's hand, he couldn't help but laugh as he shook his head and said: "Are you afraid that I might not be able to figure out that you were coming here to drink? Is that why you have brought a wine cup along to remind me?"

Lu XiaoFeng laughed too: "When I left I barely had enough time to put my pants on, how could I possibly have enough time to put down this cup? There was wine in the cup, pity it was spilled."

Old Man Huo seemed to think that all this was very peculiar as he frowned and asked: "What kind of thing would have put you into such a hurry?" He couldn't figure that out for the life of him.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed and laughed wryly: "Nothing really, just that a girl walked into my room."

Old Man Huo laughed again: "I seem to remember that women enter your room everyday, you were never scared away before!"

"This girl is different!"

"What's so different about her?"

"Everything!"

Old Man Huo blinked: "Was this girl very ugly?"

Lu XiaoFeng immediately shook his head feverishly: "Not only is she not ugly, she is almost pretty enough to be a goddess, and she had an air about her like a princess!"

"Then what are you afraid of? That she might rape you?" Old Man Huo joked.

Lu XiaoFeng smiled: "If she really wanted to rape me, then you couldn't chase me away with a broom!"

"Then what the hell did she do to scare you enough to run off?" Old Man Huo asked.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed again: "She kneeled down in front of me!"

Old Man Huo open his eyes as wide as they can possibly be and stared at Lu XiaoFeng, as if a flower suddenly grew out from his nostril.

Lu XiaoFeng seemed to be worried that he might not have understood him and explained further: "Right after she entered my room, she suddenly kneeled down toward me, both knees kind of kneeling!"

Old Man Huo finally let out a huge sigh and said: "I always thought that you were quite a normal fellow, no problems at all, but now I'm getting a little suspicious!"

Lu XiaoFeng smiled wily again: "Now you are getting a little suspicious that I might have a problem?"

Old Man Huo replied: "A goddess like woman, entered your room, and kneeled down towards you, yet you were scared so much that you ran away in a panic?"

Lu XiaoFeng nodded: "Not just in a panic, I broke through the roof as well!"

Old Man Huo sighed: "Seems like not only do you have a problem, it is

a huge problem!"

"I ran away because my mind is working just fine!"

"Oh?"

"I told you, not only is she pretty, she had quite an air about her!"

"What kind of air?"

"The kind that princesses have!"

"Have you ever seen a princess before?"

"No, but I do know that even a real princess couldn't land the 3 bodyguards she has!"

"Who are her bodyguards?"

"Liu YuHen, Xiao QiuYu, and DuGu Fang!"

Old Man Huo frowned: "The Liu YuHen that fights as if he wants to die?"

"Yes!" Lu XiaoFeng replied.

"The Xiao QiuYu that looked refined and educated but in reality is as

strong as a wild bull?"

"Yes!"

"The DuGu Fang that comes and goes without a trace and is always alone?"

"Yes!"

"All 3 of them are her bodyguards?"

"Yes!"

"She has 3 bodyguards like that, and yet she kneeled down towards you?"

"Yes!"

Old Man Huo did not say another word as he poured another cup of wine and downed it.

Lu XiaoFeng also finished what was left of the wine in his cup and said:
"Do you get it now?"

"Yes!" Old Man Huo replied.

"Why do you suppose she kneeled down towards me?"

"Because she wanted you to do something for her!"

"A girl like that, willing to kneel down toward me, what for?"

"For something very troublesome!"

"I have never met her before in my life, why would I want to go through all that trouble for her?"

"Only idiots would go for that kind of trouble!"

"Am I an idiot?"

"No, you are not!"

"If you were me, would you have ran too?"

"I would be running like hell just like you, maybe even a little faster!"

Lu XiaoFeng let out a long sigh before breaking out into a smile: "Looks like that even though you are getting old, you haven't gone dumb yet."

Old Man Huo replied: "But you are dumb as a young man already."

"Oh?"

"A girl like her, willing to kneel toward you and beg you, then this matter just can't be resolved by anyone else."

Lu XiaoFeng agreed with that assumption.

Old Man Huo continued: "Now that she's found you, do you think you can get away?"

"You think that she's going to come back?"

"Maybe she already has!"

Lu XiaoFeng smiled: "I don't have many skills, but I am pretty fast when I run away!"

"To the point that nobody can chase you down?"

"To the point that there aren't that many that could chase me down!"

Old Man Huo snickered.

Lu XiaoFeng asked: "What does that snicker for?"

"My snicker always means I'm snickering!"

"I don't know what you mean."

"There are plenty that you don't know."

Lu XiaoFeng laughed again: "At least I still know how to tell which jug of wine out of this pile is the best."

He casually grabbed a jug, which really was the best, just as he was about to break open the seal, there came three loud "Dong"! Someone had banged 3 holes the walls to his right, left, and in front of him.

Three men casually strolled in through the holes in the walls. Turned out they were Liu YuHen, Xiao QiuYu, and DuGu Fang.

From their confident and peaceful expression, it was almost as if they didn't knock those holes in the wall. It was as if the 3 of them just opened the door and returned to their own homes after a night out.

Xiao QiuYu was actually smiling as he casually observed: "We didn't come in by jumping through the window!"

"So we are not dogs!" DuGu Fang concluded.

As the 2 of them were talking, each one of them picked up a chair. Before you know it, those 2 delicately carved chairs were in pieces.

Liu YuHen slowly sat down on the bed, but he had barely just sat down when the entire bed came crashing down with a loud bang.

Xiao QiuYu frowned: "The furniture here certainly aren't very strong."

"Next time we better remember not to buy furniture from here." DuGu Fang concluded.

In the time that it took the 2 of them to make those comments, 5 or 6 more objects were smashed.

Lu XiaoFeng and Old Man Huo seemed as if they didn't even see all of this.

Old Man Huo was still slowly drinking, not a bit of pain on his face, as if these objects that they were smashing weren't his.

Soon, everything inside the house was smashed, even the 20 or so jugs of wine.

Xiao QiuYu looked around: "This house looks like it's about to collapse too, better rebuild it!"

DuGu Fang commented: "Now that's a good idea!"

The 3 of them actually started to take the house apart. Lu XiaoFeng and Old Man Huo still just sat there, slowly drinking their wine.

"Bang", "Boom", "Dong"! The walls on all 4 sides were knocked out. "Kaboom"! The roof came crashing down, right on top of Lu XiaoFeng

and Old Man Huo.

Suddenly, the 2 of them disappeared.

DuGu Fang and Xiao QiuYu shot a look at each other and looked behind them, the 2 of them were sitting on the grassing opening just in front of the house, stilling sitting on those 2 chairs, and the jug of wine was stilling sitting on the table in front of them.

Xiao QiuYu observed again: "Lust is the knife that break your bones, wine is the poison that rots your belly, we can't let it harm others!"

DuGu Fang concluded again: "Right, we can't leave even one jug!"

So he self-righteously walked over, grabbed the jug on the table, and threw it onto the ground hard.

This time the jug wasn't smashed. It suddenly returned back onto the table.

DuGu Fang frowned, grabbed it again, and threw it down as hard as he can.

This time he saw what happened, before the jug hit the ground, Lu XiaoFeng suddenly snatched it out of the air.

DuGu Fang threw it again, Lu XiaoFeng caught it again. In a blink of an eye DuGu Fang had already threw this jug of wine at the ground at least 8

times, but this jug was still just sitting there on the table. DuGu Fang stared at this jug, as if he was shocked out of his wits.

Only after staring for a long time did he finally turn around and say to Xiao QiuYu with a forced smile on his face: "This jug is possessed by a demon, it can't be smashed!"

Xiao QiuYu asked: "What kind of demon?"

"An alcoholic one, of course!"

"Let me give it a try."

He walked over as well, as if there wasn't 2 men there sitting at the table at all, suddenly grabbed the jug and gave it a push.

The jug flew out 20 or 30 meters. But it still wasn't smashed.

When the jug went flying, so did Lu XiaoFeng.

When Lu XiaoFeng sat back down on the chair, the jug also returned to the table.

Xiao QiuYu grabbed it again and pushed, this time the jug went even faster and farther.

He was born astoundingly strong, a push like this from him was enough

to send an iron block that weighed several hundred kilograms.

But the jug returned again this time, followed closely by Lu XiaoFeng.

Xiao QiuYu was also shocked as he muttered: "Seems like there really is a demon possessing this jug, an alcoholic demon that's got wings."

Liu YuHen suddenly snickered. After a single laugh, he was already at the table. He grabbed the jug with both hands, grabbed it really tight, and suddenly tried to smash it with his forehead.

The others were trying to smash the jug, but he seemed to be trying to smash his head.

Xiao QiuYu sighed, this time the jug was undoubtedly going to be smashed, but his head won't be much better off either.

But his head didn't split open and the jug wasn't smashed.

Lu XiaoFeng's hand suddenly reached out and caught the jug by placing his hand between it and Liu YuHen's head.

Liu YuHen let out another snicker as he suddenly jumped up and kicked at Lu XiaoFeng's stomach. This kick didn't land either.

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly jumped up and somersaulted over his head, landing behind him, still blocking that jug of wine with hand.

Liu YuHen kicked back, Lu XiaoFeng somersaulted over him again to in front of him. He suddenly sighed and said: "This jug of wine is our last jug, that head is your last head as well, why are you so determined to smash them?"

Liu YuHen stared at him, that good eye of his seemed to have turned just like his other eye, turning into a dark, deep hole.

Xiao QiuYu suddenly busted out laughing: "Looks like this guy must be the real Lu XiaoFeng!"

DuGu Fang replied: "Oh?"

"Other than Lu XiaoFeng, who else would waste so much effort on a jug of wine?"

DuGu Fang busted out laughing as well: "That's right, there aren't that many dummies like this in the world!"

Smiling, Xiao QiuYu gently took the jug away from Liu YuHen and placed it back onto the table.

"Beng"! Suddenly this jug went into pieces and the wine that was in the jug was spilled all over the table--Liu YuHen's hands and Lu XiaoFeng's hand were both exerting force onto the jug, even if this jug was made of iron it would have been smashed.

Xiao QiuYu was taken a back for a moment, then let out a rather forced smile: "Wouldn't you know it? When you want to smash it, you can't; when

you don't want to smash it anymore, it does!"

Lu XiaoFeng casually replied: "There's a lot of things in the world that just are the way they are and can't be forced, so why take it all so seriously?"

Liu YuHen's eyes suddenly looked indescribably sad and pitiful as he turned around and walked off.

Seemed like what Lu XiaoFeng just said reminded him of some secret that's buried deep inside of him.

It was at this time that a cute and refreshing voice said: "Her Majesty Princess DanFeng of the Golden Roc dynasty, the Red Pheonix Princess herself, would like an audience with a Mr. Lu, Lu XiaoFeng."

The voice belonged to a very cute and honest looking girl with large eyes and colorful clothing.

She had just walked out of the thick jubube bush, but already seemed like all the stars in the sky had emptied into her eyes.

Lu XiaoFeng asked: "The Red Pheonix Princess? Princess DanFeng?"

The girl looked at him with that pair of bright, shining eyes of hers and smiled: "Princess DanFeng, Red Pheonix, not Princess XiaoFeng, little pheonix."

Lu XiaoFeng looked over at Old Man Huo, sighed and muttered: "So she really is a princess!"

The girl replied: "Absolutely 100% authentic!"

The girl smiled again, such a sweet smile: "She afraid that Mr. Lu would be scared off again, so she's waiting outside!"

Although her smile was sweet, she was talking a bit slow. All Lu XiaoFeng could do was to smile back.

The girl stared at him and smiled again: "She's waiting for you outside, now the question is whether or not Mr. Lu dares to see her."

Old Man Huo suddenly interrupted: "Of course he dares!"

The quiet and mysterious old man smiled and continued: "If he doesn't go see this princess, everyone of his friend's houses might be torn down pretty soon!"

The stars were twinkling in the sky, the new moon nestled itself comfortably inside of this sparkling quilt, there was suddenly a fragrance permeating through the jujube woods--it didn't come from the jujubes, it was flower fragrance.

It came from a dog, a very strong looking hunting dog with long ears and long legs.

There were rings upon rings of flowers on him, and he carried a flower basket in his mouth as well.

Inside of this basket full of flower was a faint glint of gold, coming from 4 gold ingots that weighed at least 50 tael each.

The girl took the basket in her hand and sweetly said: "This is compensation from our princess for the damage to the old gentleman, would Mr. Lu accept it on his behalf?"

Lu XiaoFeng blinked: "What's that for? Because you guys tore down his house?"

The girl nodded.

Lu XiaoFeng observed: "These 4 ingots are more than 100 taels in total, quite a bit of money!"

Little wooden houses like that, 50 taels of gold would get you several of them, so of course this was quite a bit of money.

The girl said: "Only hope that this old gentleman would kindly accept this small token of our appreciation and regret."

Lu XiaoFeng replied: "He won't!"

"Why?"

"Because he doesn't need this 100 or so taels of gold at all, and if it is compensation for the house, it seems to be a little short."

"These ingots are 50 taels each!"

"I can tell."

"This is still not enough to pay for the house?"

"Just a bit short!"

"Short by how much?"

"Exactly how much, I'm not too sure. But I would estimate about 30 or 40 thousand more taels would be about right!"

"30 or 40 thousand taels of what?"

"30 or 40 thousand taels of gold, of course!"

The girl laughed.

"You don't believe me?"

The girl couldn't stop laughing, running into such a rip off, what could she do other than laugh? Pay him tens of thousands of taels of gold?

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly picked up the decorated wooden chair that he was just sitting on: "Do you know what kind of chair this is?"

The girl said in between her laughs: "Looks like one for people to sit in!"

"But this chair was made 400 years ago by that famous carpenter Lu Zhi, he carved the decorations on himself. There are only 11 of these in the world, 5 of them are inside the imperial palace, there was 6 of them here, but they just smashed 4 of them."

The girl's eyes were opened as wide as they possibly be as she stared at that chair in his hand, she was finding it harder and harder to laugh!

Lu XiaoFeng asked: "Do you know who lived in this house before?"

The girl shook her head.

"This was the summer retreat for the famous poet Lu FangWeng, he had scribbled on the walls some of his poems, now they are all smashed to bits."

The girl's eyes got even bigger as she looked shocked.

Lu XiaoFeng casually observed: "Every single piece of wood in this house is just about priceless, even if you came with 40 or 50 thousand taels of gold, you would be short."

He let out a little laugh and continued: "Fortunately this old gentleman doesn't want you to pay for the damages at all, because 40 or 50 thousand taels of gold is about the same as a farthing to him!"

The girl quietly licked her lips as she stared at the old man in disbelief.

Old Man Huo was still comfortably sitting there, slowly sampling the half a cup of wine left in his cup, as if there is nothing in the world more important than this half cup of wine.

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly turned to DuGu Fang, smiled, and asked: "I know for a fact that you are always very knowledgeable about the events in this world, so I take it that you must have heard that who was the richest man in the world!"

DuGu Fang replied in a heavy tone: "If you want to talk about the most land, then it's the Hua family just south of the Yantze; if you count priceless objects, then it's Yan family just inside of the of the Great Wall in central ShanXi plains. But as for who really is the richest, then it's probably Huo Xiu."

"Do you know what kind of a man this Huo Xiu is?"

"Although he is the richest man in the world, he likes to live like a hermit, so not that many people have ever seen him; I heard that he is a very unsociable and eccentric old man, and that...." He suddenly stopped and stared at Old Man Huo.

Now everyone finally realized that this quiet and mysterious old man

was Huo Xiu, the richest man in the world.

Old Man Huo suddenly sighed and slowly got up: "Since somebody knows that I live here, I can't stay here anymore, why don't you have it."

Lu XiaoFeng looked at the pieces of wood on the ground and said: "I remember you would not even let me borrow it for a couple of days before."

Old Man Huo casually replied: "You just said it yourself, everything in there is priceless, how can I let people borrow them?"

"But now that it is just wood, you can!"

"That's right!"

Lu XiaoFeng sighed and smiled: "I finally figured out how you got to be so rich!"

Old Man Huo's face did not change at all as he casually replied: "There's something else you should know."

"What?"

"When you run away, there really isn't that many people in the world that can chase you down; but other than people, there are a lot of other things in the world, say for example...."

"For example, a hunting dog with a very sensitive nose!"

Old Man Huo sighed: "So you are not so stupid after all, maybe one of these days you'll be rich too!"

Ebony black carriage pulled by an ebony black horse, bright, shiny black. That bright and black carriage was covered with flowers of all colors as well.

The little girl spoke up: "Her Majesty is waiting for you inside the carriage, why don't you go in."

Lu XiaoFeng asked: "Go in?"

"Mmhmm!"

"Then?"

"Then this carriage will take you somewhere you never been before. I guarantee you won't regret it once we get there!"

"Of course I won't regret it, because I'm not going."

The girl stared at him, she seemed to be surprised: "Why not?"

"Why should I allow myself to be taken to a place I never been before by a person I have never met before?"

The girl blinked: "Because... because we'll give you lots and lots of gold!"

Lu XiaoFeng laughed.

The girl asked: "You don't like gold?"

"I do, but I don't like to risk my life for gold."

The girls rolled her eyes around for a bit and then whispered: "It's really quiet inside the carriage, Her Majesty is very pretty, and this trip is rather long, who knows what might happen during it!"

Lu XiaoFeng smiled: "Now that's a lot more effective on me!"

The girl's eyes sparkled: "You have decided to go in it?"

"No!"

The girl pouted: "Why not?"

Casually, Lu XiaoFeng replied: "I have always like pretty women, but I don't like to risk my life for pretty women either!"

"What would you risk your life for?"

"Myself."

"Other than yourself, there isn't anyone else in the world that you would risk your life for?"

"No!"

The girl's eyes rolled about for a bit more: "Not even for Hua ManLou?"

"Hua ManLou?"

The little girl said casually: "I figure you should know who Hua ManLou is, he's waiting for you at that place. If you don't go, then he would be very disappointed!"

"If he wanted me to go, he would have come and found me himself."

"Pity that he can't come right now!"

"Why?"

"Because he can't go anywhere right now!"

"You are saying that he has fallen into your hands?"

"That's about right!"

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly busted out laughing, as if he just heard the funniest joke in the world, he was laughing so hard that he doubled over.

The little girl couldn't help but ask: "What are you laughing at?"

Still laughing, Lu XiaoFeng replied: "At you. You are still a kid after all, don't even know how to tell a lie!"

"Oh?"

"If you guys can get to Hua ManLou, then there's nothing in the world that you guys can't do, what's the point in coming and getting me?"

The girl smiled a little: "You know, you are not that stupid, but you are not that smart either!"

"Oh?"

"If you were smart, you would have realized 2 things by now!"

"Oh?"

"First of all, I'm not a kid anymore, I'm the older cousin of Princess DanFeng, she's only 19, I'm already 20."

This stopped Lu XiaoFeng dead in his tracks as he sized up the girl again, no matter how many times he looks at her, he still couldn't see her as anything but a 12 year old girl, much less 20 years old.

The girl casually continued: "You should know that there are some people that just can't grow tall, there are some 60 or 70 years old grandmas much shorter than me, you have seen them before haven't you?"

Although he still didn't quite believe her, Lu XiaoFeng had to admit there are people like that in the world.

The girl continued: "Second of all, you should know that Hua ManLou is not like you!"

"No, he isn't. He's smarter than me!"

"But he's also a good guy!"

"And I'm not?"

"Specifically because you are not a good guy, that's why you don't easily believe other people's lies. But he trusts everyone, to trick him is much easier!"

Lu XiaoFeng sized her up several more times and suddenly asked: "Are you really 20 years old?"

"Just turned 20 last month."

Smiling, Lu XiaoFeng casually told her: "Well, any 20 year old should know that a bad guy like me will never risk his life for a friend, any friend!"

The girl stared at him: "Really?"

"Really!"

Lu XiaoFeng was already in the carriage when the carriage started moving.

The inside of the carriage was filled with all kinds of flowers as well, Princess DanFeng was sitting among the flowers, like the world's most precious and beautiful black rose. Her pupils were ebony black as well, black and shiny, she was still staring at Lu XiaoFeng.

Lu XiaoFeng wasn't looking at her, he had already closed his eyes, as if he was about to take a nap.

Princess DanFeng suddenly smiled and said to him in tender voice: "For a moment there I thought you weren't going to come."

Lu XiaoFeng replied: "Oh?"

"I thought I heard you say that you would never risk your life for a friend!"

Nonchalantly, Lu XiaoFeng replied: "I'm not going to risk my life for a friend any time soon either, but I don't mind getting on a carriage for a friend at all."

Princess DanFeng laughed. When she laughs, it's as if an entire garden of flowers suddenly blossomed right in front of you.

Lu XiaoFeng had barely opened his eyes when he closed them again.

Sweetly, Princess DanFeng asked: "You won't even look at me, why?"

"Because this carriage is very small, and I'm a man that can't resist being seduced!"

"You are afraid that I might seduce you?"

"I don't want to risk my life for you!"

"How do you know that I'm going to ask you to risk your life?"

"Because I'm not stupid!"

Princess DanFeng picked up a flower and stared at it; after a long

paused, she finally gently sighed and said: "You are right, the reason we came to you today was to ask you to do something for us. But I don't want to seduce you, and don't need to."

"Oh?"

"Because I know there's a type of person that would do anything for a friend!"

"Which type is that?"

"Your type!"

Lu XiaoFeng smiled: "I don't even know what type of person I am, how come you know?"

"I have never met you before, but I have heard a lot of rumors about you."

Lu XiaoFeng was listening, the only person in the world that haven't heard of those rumors was probably himself.

Princess DanFeng said: "I heard a lot of people say you are an asshole, but at the same time they couldn't help but admit that you are the most lovable asshole in the world."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed, he couldn't decide if that was a put down or a compliment. But he had finally opened his eyes.

Princess DanFeng continued: "They all say that on the outside, you are like a rock that's fell into the latrine, hard and stinky; but inside your heart is softer than tofu." Lu XiaoFeng smiled, all he could do was smile.

Princess DanFeng suddenly let out a little laugh and said: "Of course, rumors aren't very reliable, but at least there is one point that they were right about."

"And what's that?"

"I have never understood why they say you got 4 eyebrows, now I finally understand."

Lu XiaoFeng frowned, when he frowns, it seemed like his mustache was frowning too.

Princess DanFeng continued: "Did you just realize who was the person that told me about that?"

Still frowning, Lu XiaoFeng asked: "Hua ManLou is really at that place?"

"Why should I lie to you? Besides, you'll meet him soon."

"Although he can't see, but he can feel danger coming 5 kilometers away. I really can't figure out how he had fallen into your hands."

"Because he's a good guy, and he is also a man. When a good man run

into a bad girl, very rarely does he not get tricked."

Coldly, Lu XiaoFeng asked: "He ran into you?"

Princess DanFeng sighed: "Although sometimes I felt inclined to trick some people, but even if I was 10 times better I still couldn't compare with ShangGuan FeiYan."

"ShangGuan FeiYan?"

"XueEr's older sister, ShangGuan FeiYan."

"Then who's XueEr?"

"XueEr is my younger cousin, she's that girl that just invited you here."

"She's not your older cousin?"

Princess DanFeng laughed: "She's only 12 years old, how could be older than me?"

Lu XiaoFeng didn't know what he should do, should he bust out laughing? Or bust out crying?

He just couldn't believe that he would actually be tricked to that level by a 12 year old girl.

With a younger sister like that, imagine what the older sister would be like?

Seeing the half-laughing half-crying expression on his face, Princess DanFeng let out a sweet peal of laughter and said: "That little devil doesn't even blink when she lies, did you get tricked by her as well?"

Lu XiaoFeng laughed wily: "At least I figured out how come Hua ManLou was tricked."

"Although he's in our hands, we have been treating him very respectfully. Not only because he is your friend, but because he is quite a character himself."

"That he is."

"You and him, and Zhu Ting as well, seemed have been friends ever since you guys were little right?"

"You seem to know all there is to know about me."

Princess DanFeng smiled: "To be honest, in order to find you, we prepared for this for 7 whole months."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed: "If someone spends 7 whole months in preparation to find a guy, that guy is about to be very unlucky."

Princess DanFeng gently replied: "But we don't want to do any harm to

you!" Lu XiaoFeng smiled rather bitterly.

Princess DanFeng continued: "Although the thing we are asking you to do is dangerous, but I believe you will get it done without any problems."

She stared at him, her expression was filled with admiration and confidence.

Lu XiaoFeng asked: "What is the thing that you guys want me to do?"

Hesitating, Princess DanFeng lowered her head and replied: "I don't have to tell you right now, you'll find out soon enough."

"Liu YuHen, Xiao QiuYu, and DuGu Fang are all here for this matter?"

Princess DanFeng nodded and laughed: "Getting them wasn't easy, but at least it was a lot easier than getting you."

Lu XiaoFeng asked: "How did you get the 3 of them anyways?"

Princess DanFeng smiled: "Everyone has a weakness, they wouldn't be able to guess how I was manage to be able to get you."

She put the flower in her hand in front of Lu XiaoFeng's face and continued: "Liu YuHen, Xiao QiuYu, DuGu Fang, Hua ManLou, and then there's you. If there is something in the world that the 5 of you can't do then it just can't be done."

Skin white fog had gathered outside of the carriage, the lighting inside the carriage was even more gentle.

Lu XiaoFeng stared at the flower in her hand, the flower was pretty, but her hand was even prettier.

Princess DanFeng used that soft and refined hand of hers to stick the flower onto Lu XiaoFeng's shirt and then softly said: "You best take a nice little nap."

"Why?"

Princess DanFeng lowered her head and said in an even softer and gentler tone: "Because I'm about to lose control of myself and seduce you."

The carriage went forth through the thick fog. Although the fog was dense, it was morning fog, ever so slowly the night has ended.

Lu XiaoFeng was leaning sideways against the carriage, seemingly asleep.

Princess DanFeng said gently: "Go to sleep, that way you might be able to see him by the time you wake up."

Lu XiaoFeng couldn't help but open his eyes again: "Who is he?"

"The Golden Roc Emperor."

Chapter 3 - Bringing some justice

The walkway was dark and damp, as if it had never seen the light of day. At the end of the walkway was a huge door, the door rings on it were glistening. They pushed open the door and saw the Golden Roc Emperor.

The Golden Roc Emperor was not a tall and commanding figure.

{Note: A roc is a large, legendary, eagle-like bird popular in Eastern legends that was so huge that it carried off humans with its talons.}

He seemed to have been worn out by the passing of time, like a rooster that was just beginning to wilt in the morbid cold winds.

He was sitting in a recliner, the mattresses and blankets that was piled onto the chair and him made him looked like an old but stately pine tree that was so high on the side of the mountain that it was in the clouds.

But Lu XiaoFeng wasn't disappointed by his appearance, because in his eyes there was still flashed an indescribable air of class and honor.

That long eared and long legged hunting dog had already returned and was resting by his foot.

Princess DanFeng had also quietly walked to his side and kneeled down at his side, as if she was telling him about the trip.

Those pair of bright and dignified eyes of the Golden Roc Emperor did not leave Lu XiaoFeng the entire time. He suddenly spoke up: "Come here, young man."

His voice was low but powerful, as if whatever comes out of his mouth must be obeyed. But Lu XiaoFeng did not walk over to him.

Lu XiaoFeng wasn't someone who's used to receiving orders, so he actually sat down as far as he could in a chair opposite of the old man.

The room was dark, but the Golden Roc Emperor's eyes lit up as he demanded: "Are you Lu XiaoFeng?"

Casually, Lu XiaoFeng replied: "Yes, Lu XiaoFeng, not ShangGuan DanFeng."

He figured out that her surname was ShangGuan as well, in the old days everyone in their imperial court was surnamed ShangGuan, everyone in their imperial court was proud of their surname.

The Golden Roc Emperor suddenly burst out laughing: "Lu XiaoFeng really is Lu XiaoFeng, looks like we found the right guy!"

He continued: "You are looking for Hua ManLou?"

Lu XiaoFeng nodded.

"He's doing great, you can see him as soon as you promise to do

something for me."

"What thing?"

The Golden Roc Emperor did not answer.

Instead, he stared at a very peculiar looking ring on his hand and his ashened face suddenly lit up in a peculiar way. After a long time, he finally, slowly, began to speak again: "Our dynasty is a very old and ancient dynasty. Much older than your present dynasty."

His voice became even more forceful, obviously boosted by the pride he had for his name and family.

Lu XiaoFeng didn't want to destroy an elderly man's pride, so he didn't say anything.

The Golden Roc Emperor continued: "Although our country has fallen, the blood that we bleed are still royal blood. As long as one of us is still alive, our dynasty will live on!"

Not only was his voice filled with pride, it was also filled with confidence.

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly felt that this old man really did have some very admirable traits on him.

At least he wasn't someone that's easily knocked down. Lu XiaoFeng

had always admired this kind of people, he admired their courage and self-belief.

The Golden Roc Emperor went further: "Although our country was situated at a remote area, but we were always rich. Not only was the harvest constantly great, there were countless amount of gold and gems buried in the mountains."

Finally, Lu XiaoFeng could not help but ask: "Then why did you move to the central plains?"

Golden Roc Emperor's face lost some of its shine and there was a hint of pain and hatred in his eyes as he said: "Precisely because we were rich! Our neighbors coveted our land as they allied with Kazaken raiders and invaded our country!"

{Note:Kazakes are from modern day Kazakhstan.}

"That was more than 50 years ago. I was just a little kid then, my father had concentrated on laws and orders during his reign, so there was no way he could fight off the barbaric raiders among them. But he was still determined to fight until his death, to live and die with his country!"

Lu XiaoFeng concluded: "He was the one who made you move here."

The Golden Roc Emperor nodded: "To keep our strength so that we could still make a comeback some time later, not only did he make leave, he also divided the national treasury into 4 parts, gave each of his most trusted advisors one portion, and made them move into the central

plains with me."

His face was filled with gratitude as he continued: "One of them is my uncle ShangGuan Sheng, he brought me here, used the portion of the money he was given to buy up the land and house, and made it possible for my family to live here without any worries. I will never be able to forget all he has done for us."

Lu XiaoFeng asked: "What about the other 3?"

The gratitude that was on his face turned to anger: "I have never seen any of them ever again after the day I left my father. But I will never, ever, forget their names!"

Lu XiaoFeng had just picked up some interested in this matter, so he immediately asked: "What is their names?"

With his hands in fists in hate, the Golden Roc Emperor said: "ShangGuan Mu, Hu DuHe, and Yan LiBen!"

Lu XiaoFeng answered back in a heavy voice: "I have never heard of any of them before!"

"But you must have seen them before!"

"Oh?"

"As soon as they arrived in China, they changed their names. It wasn't

until a year ago did I finally found out who they are!"

He suddenly made a gesture towards his daughter. Princess DanFeng got up from where she sat and took out 3 rolled up painting scrolls from an old chest behind him.

In anger, the Golden Roc Emperor said: "These are their portraits, I would venture to say that you know of at least 2 of them!"

There were 2 portraits on every scroll, one was young and the other one old, the 2 portraits are of the same person.

Princess DanFeng unrolled the first scroll: "The portrait on top was what he looked like when he left our country. The portrait on the bottom was what we found out he looks like now."

This person had a round face full of smiles. He looked very warm and friendly, but had a very big and hooked nose.

Lu XiaoFeng frowned: "This person looks like Yan TieShan of the Yan family just inside of the Great Wall."

Gritting his teeth, the Golden Roc Emperor replied: "That's right. The Yan TieShan of today is the Yan LiBen of yester-years. I am so grateful to the heavens that he haven't died yet."

The 2nd man had very high cheek bones and his triangle shaped eyes were filled with pride, obviously someone with a lot of power.

When Lu XiaoFeng saw him, his expression actually changed.

The Golden Roc Emperor spoke up: "This is Hu DuHe, his name now is GuDu YiHe, he is the head of the Green Shirt Pavilion!"

Lu XiaoFeng looked shocked for a long time before finally replying: "I know this guy too, but I didn't know he was the master of the First Pavilion of the Green Shirt Pavilion."

He sighed deeply and continued: "I only knew that he is the head of E'Mei Sect!"

The Golden Roc Emperor observed: "He did the best job in hiding his origin, there is probably not a single person in the world that could have guessed the the honorable head of E'Mei Sect would be a shameless traitor!"

The third person was a thin, old man; small, lonely, clean, and steadfast.

Lu XiaoFeng was nearly shrieking: "Huo Xiu!"

"That's right, Huo Xiu. ShangGuan Mu's name nowadays is Huo Xiu!"

He continued: "Everyone says Huo Xiu is the weirdest, richest man in the world. 50 years ago, he was making his way through the martial world with his bare fists, then suddenly, as if through a miracle, he became the richest man in the world. Until now, other than you, there

probably isn't anyone in the martial world that knows just how he came into possession of all that wealth!"

Lu XiaoFeng's face suddenly turned white as he backed up several steps and sat down.

The Golden Roc Emperor stared at him: "I think you have figured out why I have invited you here."

Lu XiaoFeng stared at him for a long time before letting out a long sigh: "But I still don't know what you want."

The Golden Roc Emperor tightened his fists and slammed it down onto the arm of the chair: "I don't want much of anything, I just want justice!"

"Justice? As in revenge?"

The Golden Roc Emperor stared back at him in silence.

"You want me to go get revenge for you?"

The Golden Roc Emperor was quiet for a very long time before he suddenly let out a sigh and replied with a hint of sadness: "They are all old now, I'm old now. What's the point in killing them now?"

He immediately shook his head and refuted what he just said: "But I just can't let them get away with it like this!"

Lu XiaoFeng didn't say anything, he had no right to say anything

The Golden Roc Emperor continued: "First, I want them to give all the money that they took from the Golden Roc Empire back, so that it could be revived one day."

That does seem very fair and justified.

He continued: "Second, I want them to repent for their wrongs themselves in front of the altar to my father, so that my father would be able to rest in peace."

Lu XiaoFeng thought for a while and sighed: "Those 2 requests really are quite fair."

The frown on the face of the Golden Roc Emperor disappeared: "I knew you are a righteous young man and would never refuse this kind of request."

After thinking for another long while, Lu XiaoFeng said with a rather forced smile: "It's just that it is very hard to get those 2 things done."

"If you couldn't do it, then who could?"

Lu XiaoFeng sighed: "Maybe nobody."

He immediately added: "Nowadays these 3 men are all among the most famous and admired men in the world, if they really do what you want

them to do, then it's the same as admitting their crimes back then. Their fame, their power, their riches would all be destroyed!"

The Golden Roc Emperor's expression turned even more serious: "I already figured that they would never admit what they did."

Lu XiaoFeng observed: "It's not that they are scarily wealthy and powerful, they are all indescribably and incredibly amazing at kungfu." The Golden Roc Emperor nodded: "Father gave such a great responsibility to them precisely because they are the best fighters in the Golden Roc Empire."

Lu XiaoFeng added: "Not to mention that in the last 50 years, they were all undoubtedly fearing that you would come to them seeking revenge, so who knows how much their kungfu had advanced."

He sighed and continued: "I have always said that there are really only 5 or 6 real kungfu masters in the world today. Huo Xiu and DuGu YiHe are in that group."

Women are always curious, so Princess DanFeng couldn't help but ask: "Who are the other 3 or 4?"

"The Abbot of ShaoLin, Father Despair, and the Elder of WuDang, Taoist Mu, both are to the point of beyond comprehension in terms of inner and outer kungfu. But if you are considering fast and amazing sword techniques, then you have to include "Master of the White Cloud Castle" Ye GuCheng of the Flying Goddess Island in the South Sea and XiMen ChuiXue of the Thousand Plum Mansion."

Princess DanFeng stared at him and asked: "How about yourself?"

Lu XiaoFeng smiled, only smiled and did not answer, he didn't need to answer.

The Golden Roc Emperor suddenly sighed and, with great sadness, said: "I know that this matter is very troublesome, that's why I won't force you to help us, why not consider it for a bit?"

Suddenly his demeanor turned to anger as he tightened his fist again in anger: "But no matter what we have to fight it out with them, as long as there is one of us left we will keep on fighting!"

Lu XiaoFeng sighed: "I know...."

After a long silence, the Golden Roc Emperor suddenly broke out into a forced smile: "No matter what happens, Mr. Lu is still our honored guest! Where's the wine?"

Princess DanFeng lowered her head and replied: "I'll go tell the servants to bring some right now."

The Golden Roc Emperor instructed: "Get our best Persian wine, and invite Mr. Hua here as well."

"Yes, father."

The Golden Roc Emperor looked at Lu XiaoFeng, suddenly his

expression turned to one of pride again as he slowly said: "No matter what happens, you are already our friend. The descendents of the Golden Roc Empire would never ever use anything to force our friend to do things."

The cup was ancient and delicate, the wine was slightly purple in color.

Lu XiaoFeng silently watched Princess DanFeng pour the wine into the ancient and delicate cup, Hua ManLou was sitting at his side.

They didn't say anything to each other when they met, they only had a firm handshake.

That was enough to explain everything. Princess DanFeng finished pouring the wine, she had only poured 3 cups.

The Golden Roc Emperor looked up and smiled: "I haven't drank in years, but I'll make an exception tonight for our guests."

But Princess DanFeng was shaking her head: "I'll drink for you, remember your leg?"

The Golden Roc Emperor gave her a quite ferocious stare before finally breaking out into a smile: "Alright, I won't drink. Luckily watching other people drink is quite exhilarating as well, good wine always bring great spirits and energy."

Princess DanFeng explained to Lu XiaoFeng with a smile: "If father drinks any kind of alcohol, both of his legs would immediately swell up, to the point that it's impossible for him to walk. Please forgive him for not being able to drink with you."

Lu XiaoFeng picked up his cup with a smile.

Princess DanFeng turned her body so that her back was facing her father and suddenly gave Lu XiaoFeng a very strange look. So strange that Lu XiaoFeng did not understand what it was for.

Princess DanFeng picked up her cup with a smile and said: "Father has kept this wine around for years, hopefully it is up to our guest's standards."

She lifted her cup and drank the wine first herself, then lightly sighed and said: "Such good wine."

It's very rare that a host would repeatedly praise his or her own wine and Princess DanFeng was absolutely not a person who likes to brag about herself.

Lu XiaoFeng was completely puzzled when he suddenly realized that he wasn't drinking wine, he was drinking dyed water.

He suddenly understood what Princess DanFeng was doing, and feared that Hua ManLou would not be able to figure it out because he didn't see her expression.

But Hua ManLou was smiling, smiling as he drank all of the "wine" in his cup, afterwards he also lightly sighed and said: "Such good wine."

Smiling, Lu XiaoFeng added: "This is just about the best wine I have ever had!" The Golden Roc Emperor busted out laughing, his first real laugh, and said: "Such a good wine is really hard to come by, but only you 2 are really fit to drink such good wine."

Lu XiaoFeng downed 3 more cups in quick succession before suddenly saying, with a smile, "Such good wine can't possibly be drank without compensation."

The Golden Roc Emperor's eyes lit up: "Are you saying...."

Lu XiaoFeng let out a long and deep sigh: "The justice that you are looking for, I will give my best to give it to you."

The Golden Roc Emperor quickly stood up, walked up to him, and put his hands on his shoulders. Tears of gratitude flooded into the old and sad eyes of his. He tried to talk, but only choked out: "Thank you, thank you so much, thank you...."

He kept on repeating and repeating that until everyone had lost count exactly how many times he said it.

Princess DanFeng, standing at his side, had to quietly turn around and quickly wipe off the tears gathering in her eyes.

Only after a long time did the Golden Roc Emperor calm down a little as he said: "Although DuGu Fang has the same surname as DuGu YiHe, the 2 of them have a lot of hatred and enmities between them; that half of Liu YuHen's face was sliced off by Yan TieShan and Xiao QiuYu just happens to be a friend of his that would gladly die for him. As long as you are willing to help us do this, the 3 of them would follow your lead to the depth of hell if that's where you have to go."

But Lu XiaoFeng shook his head: "I think it's best if they stay here."

The Golden Roc Emperor frowned: "Why?"

Lu XiaoFeng sighed: "I know that they are first rate masters in the martial world, but asking them to go up against DuGu YiHe and Huo Xiu is like asking them to commit suicide."

"You... you don't need any help?"

"Of course I do."

With a smile, he gently patted Hua ManLou's shoulder: "We've been partners for the longest time anyways."

The Golden Roc Emperor stared at Hua ManLou, he didn't seem to be too sure about this suggestion.

He really found it hard to believe that this blind man could be better than the likes of Liu YuHen and Xiao QiuYu. Nobody would believe it.

But Lu XiaoFeng had already moved on: "Other than him, I need to get 2 or 3 more men."

"Who?"

"Got to get Zhu Ting first."

He smiled: "Although Zhu Ting is no fighter, but he is very useful."

The Golden Roc Emperor waited for his explanation.

"Since you have found them, it is very likely that they have found you as well. You want to get justice from them, it is also very likely they will try to move before us and kill you."

The Golden Roc Emperor sneered: "I'm not afraid of that."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed: "You're not afraid, I am. That's why I have to get Zhu Ting here, only he can turn this place into an impenetrable fortress."

"He understands gadgets and such things?"

Lu XiaoFeng smiled: "If he wanted to, he could probably make a chair that bites."

The Golden Roc Emperor smiled as well: "Seems like you really do have

some very interesting friends."

"But now I only hope that I could motivate one of them to help me on this matter."

The Golden Roc Emperor's eyes lit up: "How helpful would he be?"

"If he's willing to help, then this matter would actually have a chance of being accomplished."

"Who is he?"

"XiMen ChuiXue!"

The hall way had become even more dark and mysterious, for it was now afternoon.

Princess DanFeng had her head bowed and her ebony colored hair fell onto her shoulders like a gentle stream. Lightly, she said: "I don't know how to thank you for what just happened."

Lu XiaoFeng asked: "Are you talking about that cup of wine?"

Princess DanFeng's face turned red for a moment as she bowed her head even more: "I'm sure you have noticed by now that father is a very

proud man, and he really can't take anymore shocks or setbacks. So I really do not want to let him find out the truth."

"I understand."

Princess DanFeng sighed: "Other than the rooms that my father stays in, his bedroom and the guest room, all the other rooms are empty. Even those precious aged wine were slowly sold off one by one."

Her head got even lower as she was practically looking at her feet: "We really don't have anybody productive in our house. Trying to maintain it the way it is was hard, besides, we had a lot to do. To find you, I even had to pawn away that string of pearls that my mother left me."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed: "I didn't know much about your situation, but that cup of wine told me a lot."

Princess DanFeng suddenly lifted her head up and stared at him: "Did you finally agree because you found out what our situation was really like?"

"That and the fact that he already considered me as a friend and did not use anything to threaten or blackmail me."

Princess DanFeng stared at him, those beautiful eyes of hers were filled once again with tears of gratitude.

So she quickly bowed her head again and said in a tender voice: "I was wrong the entire time. I thought that you are a person that would never

be moved by feelings and sympathy."

The entire time, Hua ManLou had been smiling. He listens a lot and says very little, only now did he finally speak up: "I told you, this guy may be tough and stinky on the outside, but inside his heart is actually softer than tofu!"

Princess DanFeng suppressed a little laugh and replied: "I say you are also wrong."

"Oh?"

"He does look very tough and hard, but not stinky at all."

Her face had turned red even before she had finished what she said. So she immediately changed the subject: "Our guest bedroom is really very simple and homely, hope that you won't mind that too much."

Lu XiaoFeng cleared his throat: "Maybe we shouldn't have agreed to stay for dinner."

Princess DanFeng suppressed another little laugh: "Don't forget those 4 gold ingots that you left for us." Lu XiaoFeng's eyes lit up: "Did you know that Old Man Huo was one of the guys that you are after?"

"We only found out when you told us."

Lu XiaoFeng's expression suddenly turned very serious: "But how did

you know that DuGu YiHe is the head of the Green Shirt Pavilion? This is just about the greatest secret and mysterious in all of the martial world."

Princess DanFeng hesitated before finally answering: "Because Liu YuHen was his most trusted friend once. He's also the reason why the charming and suave 'Handsome Gentleman' Liu YuHen of the past looks like what he looks like now."

Lu XiaoFeng's eyes lit up again, as if he had finally figured out a lot of stuff that's been troubling him.

The guest bedroom was big, but other than a bed, a table, and several old looking chairs, there was almost nothing else in the room.

Hua ManLou sat down, although he couldn't see, it was almost as if he could feel where the chair was.

Lu XiaoFeng looked at him, suddenly popping the question: "You ever sat down on nothing?"

Hua ManLou smiled: "Do you want me to sat down on nothing?"

Lu XiaoFeng smiled too: "I only hope that the next time you sit down, you would suddenly find yourself sitting on a girl."

"You would know more about that than me."

Lu XiaoFeng said drily: "If you knew about that as much as I did, then maybe you wouldn't fallen for their trick."

"Who's trick?"

"Already forgot about ShangGuan FeiYan?"

Hua ManLou smiled: "I didn't fall for anyone's trick, I came here on my own accord."

Lu XiaoFeng was very surprised by this: "You willingly came here? Why?"

"Maybe it's because recently my days have been too peaceful since I moved out on my own, I really wanted to do a couple of dangerous things."

Lu XiaoFeng sneered: "Maybe you were just deceived by a really good looking liar!"

Hua ManLou smiled: "Maybe she really is a good liar, but she told me the truth."

"Maybe because she found out that the best way to trick men like you is to tell the truth."

"Maybe."

"Her goal was to get you here, now that you are here, her goal has been accomplished."

Hua ManLou smiled: "You seemed to be trying to get my mad."

"You are not getting mad?"

Still smiling, Hua ManLou smiled: "Why should I be mad? They came and got me here with their carriage, treated me like an honored guest. The weather here is just wonderful and, in the yard, the flowers are just in bloom. Besides, now that you are here, even if I really was tricked by her I really don't have anything to complain about."

Lu XiaoFeng couldn't help but laugh: "Seems like it's just impossible to get you mad."

Hua ManLou suddenly asked: "Are you really thinking about asking XiMen ChuiXue?"

"Mmhmm."

"Can you really motivate him to mess with other people's business?"

With a dry smile on his face, Lu XiaoFeng replied: "I know that there really doesn't seem to be anything in the world that could move him, but I still got to go try."

"Then what?"

"I haven't thought that far yet, right now I'm just thinking about going outside and take a look around."

"Looking around for what?"

Lu XiaoFeng laughed: "Maybe I want to get a good look at ShangGuan FeiYan."

Hua ManLou was still smiling, but there was a bit of uneasiness in his smile as he casually replied: "You won't find her!"

"Oh?"

"I haven't heard her voice since I got here, seems like she had left this place."

Lu XiaoFeng stared at him, a worried look suddenly seemed to appear on his face.

But Hua ManLou just laughed some more: "She seemed to be one of those girls that never settles down or rests, always up to something."

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly laughed as well: "Actually, aren't all women like that?"

The room had just turned a bit darker. Hua ManLou quietly sat there by himself, looking as happy and peaceful as he always do. He will always be happy and satisfied, because where ever he may be, he always could feel a bit of joy and love that nobody else could.

Right now he's enjoying the beautiful spring sunset.

Suddenly he heard the sound of door knocks.

By the time he heard the knocking, the person had already entered. Actually it was 2 people, DuGu Fang and Xiao QiuYu.

But there was only the sound of one person's footsteps, the sound of DuGu Fang's footsteps was literally lighter and quieter than the gentle spring breeze.

Hua ManLou smiled: "Please sit down, there are more than 2 empty chairs here."

He did not ask who they were, nor why they had come. No matter who entered his room, he would always be this warm and friend, would always give all that he have for this person to enjoy.

DuGu Fang's face darkened as he answered coldly: "How do you know that there are 2 of us? Are you really blind?"

He had always thought that nobody would be able to hear his footsteps, he had always been very confident in his lightness kungfu. That's why he's not very happy at the moment.

But Hua ManLou was still as happy and peaceful as ever as he smiled and answered: "Sometimes I wonder if I'm really blind myself. I always thought that only those with eyes but refused to see are really blind."

Xiao QiuYu was smiling as well: "You forgot about another kind of men that are also blind."

"Which kind?"

"The dead kind!"

Hua ManLou smiled: "How do you know that dead people are blind? Maybe dead people see a lot of things like we do. None of us have died yet, so how could we really know what dead people knows or sees?"

Coldly, DuGu Fang answered: "Maybe you'll soon find out!"

Casually, Xiao QiuYu added: "We really don't know you, and we don't have any grudges against you either, but we are still here to kill you!"

Not only was Hua ManLou not surprised, he did not even seem to be the least bit unhappy about this. He was still smiling: "Actually, I have been waiting for you 2 for a while!"

DuGu Fang asked: "You knew that we would come to kill you?"

"Lu XiaoFeng is not stupid, but he has offended a lot more people than he realizes. This is because when he talks, he sometimes is like a cannon!"

DuGu Fang snickered.

Hua ManLou added: "Nobody likes to be told that he's no match for a blind man. Especially not 2 masters like you, this is really an intolerable thing. So of course you are going to come to this blind man to see how I stack up."

His expression was still peaceful as he continued: "This is the kind of thing that the heroes and men in the martial world can stand the least!"

DuGu Fang jabbed: "How about you?"

"I'm not a hero, I'm just a blind man."

Although DuGu Fang was still snickering, a look of shock had appeared on his face.

How could this blind man know so much?

Xiao QiuYu cut in: "You knew we were coming, and yet you still waited here?"

"Where can a blind man run off to?"

DuGu Fang suddenly shouted: "To hell!"

As he shouted, he made his move. A one-handed lance headed for Hua ManLou's throat like a poisonous snake while the sword Stomach Breaker was thrust as well.

His moves were slow, so slow that they didn't create any wind or sound. A blind man can't see the sword, the only thing he could do was to listen for the sound the sword creates.

But this move did not make any sound, so this move is truly a move that can break open a blind man's stomach.

Not to mention that one-handed lance was in front of the sword, if the lance missed, the sword would surely hit. But Xiao QiuYu figured wrong.

Other than hearing, this blind man seemed to have another amazing and mysterious sense.

He already seemed to sense, somehow, that the real danger wasn't coming from the lance, but from the sword. But he couldn't see nor hear the sword.

Before the sword arrived, he suddenly somersaulted. When the lance glanced by his shoulder, his hands had come together on the sword.

"Deng! Deng!" This hundred year old sword suddenly broke into 3 sections. The enemy's stomach hadn't been broken yet and his sword already was.

The longest section was still in Hua ManLou's hand. He flipped his hand and the tassel of the lance was tangled with the blade.

DuGu Fang was taken aback. Even under the light of the sunset, Xiao QiuYu's face still looked deathly white.

Still smiling, Hua ManLou said: "I didn't really want to offend Mr. Xiao QiuYu, but this move by Mr. Xiao was really bordering on cruelty to a blind man. I only hope that after Mr. Xiao find a replacement for this sword, he would leave a bit of room for himself so that he would at least have a chance to live."

The garden really was filled with a lot of flowers, but now much of them have been picked.

Only now did Lu XiaoFeng figure out where all the flowers Princess DanFeng had with her came from.

It was at this moment that he saw that little girl again.

ShangGuan Xue-Er was just standing there amidst the flower bushes, under the light of the setting sun. The faint light of the setting sun shone done onto her soft and smooth hair.

She still looked so obedient and honest, as if she had never ever said half a lie.

Lu XiaoFeng smiled, he couldn't help but walk over and say: "Hey, older cousin."

ShangGuan Xue-Er looked over at him and smiled as well: "Hey, younger cousin."

"How are you?"

"Not good."

"Why not?"

"Because I have worries, a lot of worries."

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly noticed that there was an indescribable look of worry in those bright and shining eyes of hers, even her sweet smile seemed to have a faint hint of being forced.

He had to ask: "What kind of worries?"

She answered: "I'm worried about my sister."

"Your sister? ShangGuan FeiYan?" ShangGuan Xue-Er nodded.

Lu XiaoFeng asked: "Why are you worried about her?"

"She suddenly disappeared!"

"When did she disappear?"

"The day that Hua ManLou arrived, which is also the day we left to go look for you."

Lu XiaoFeng stared at her: "If you are so worried about her, why aren't you searching for her?"

"Because she told me that she was going to stay here to wait for us to come back."

"You believe everything she says?"

"Of course!"

Lu XiaoFeng couldn't help laughing a little: "If she didn't leave, how did she suddenly disappear then?"

"I can't figure it out either, that's why I'm looking for her."

"In the flower garden?"

"Mmhmm."

"Could she be hiding in the garden, hiding for days in fact?"

"I'm not searching for her, I'm searching for her body."

Lu XiaoFeng frowned: "Her body?"

"I figured that she has been killed and buried here, in the garden."

"This is your own home, how could there be someone who wants to kill her?"

"Although this is my home, but there are others here."

"Others?"

"Like your friend Hua ManLou for example."

"You think Hua ManLou would kill?"

"Why not? Everyone can kill, even the old king himself!"

"The old king could have killed her too? Why?"

"That's why I'm looking for her, because I don't know!"

Lu XiaoFeng lightly sighed: "You worry too much, a 12 year old girl shouldn't worry so much."

ShangGuan Xue-Er looked at him, looked at him for a long time before finally, and slowly, ask: "Who said I'm only 12?"

"Your older cousin."

You believe what she says but not what I say?"

Hua ManLou asked: "Not going to look for her?"

Lu XiaoFeng replied: "Even her younger sister can't find her, what hope have I got?"

The peaceful expression on Hua ManLou's face showed a little bit of worry once again. Obviously, he has more than just normal feelings towards this suddenly disappeared girl, he couldn't hide that even if he tried.

When this feeling gets into a person's heart, it's like a diamond in the middle of a sand pile, everyone can see it at one glance.

Of course, Lu XiaoFeng saw this as well, so he immediately asked: "Have you met her younger sister?"

Hua ManLou replied: "No."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed: "Seems like your luck isn't that bad, at least it's better than mine."

"Her younger sister is a little brat?"

Lu XiaoFeng smiled out of exasperation: "Not just a little brat, she's a little devil! Not only could she trick dead people into coming back to life again when she lies, she also has a case of paranoia."

"A little kid could have paranoia?"

"Her paranoia is almost worse than an old grandma's. She's actually thinking that her sister might have been killed, she's even suspecting you or the Golden Roc Emperor as the killer."

He wanted to make Hua ManLou a bit happier, so he started to laugh.

But Hua ManLou did not look the least bit amused.

So Lu XiaoFeng had to add: "Don't you think that this paranoia of hers is funny?"

"Not at all."

"ShangGuan FeiYan is only a little girl as well, the most she could do is lie a little. Try and find a 18 or 19 year old kid that doesn't lie. Why would anyone want to kill her?"

Hua ManLou was quiet for a long time before slowly replying: "Right now, I'm only hoping for one thing."

"Hoping for what?"

Hua ManLou smiled and replied: "I only hope that they wouldn't serve fake wine tonight."

Lu XiaoFeng didn't ask anything more about this, because Hua ManLou never did care much for wine.

Lu XiaoFeng looked at him, suddenly feeling that his smile turned a bit mysterious. Anyone, no matter who, would turn a bit weird and mysterious at this point.

Lu XiaoFeng blinked a couple of times and made his tone of voice as mysterious as possible: "I'm hoping for one thing as well."

"And what's that?"

"I only hoping that the meat they serve us tonight isn't human meat, and the wine they serve doesn't have any knockout drugs!"

Chapter 4 - Fake feelings

It was a feast. The feast was held in that room that they just met the Golden Roc Emperor in. The wine and food were both available in abundance.

The wine was real wine, a particularly fine and delicious sample of Aged Carvings.

Lu XiaoFeng downed the wine in his cup in one gulp. "This wine is great," he suddenly sighed. "But compared to the Persian Wine earlier? Not even close!"

The Golden Roc Emperor burst out laughing: "This wine was collected from dew drops from certain flowers. This type of drinking seems to be a bit wasteful doesn't it?"

"He's not drinking," Hua ManLou commented with a smile. "He's pouring. He can't even taste the wine at all, giving him this kind of wine is really quite a waste of a good thing."

The Golden Roc Emperor burst out laughing yet again: "Looks like you really know everything there is to know about him."

Not only did he act happier tonight, he actually had changed into a silk robe that had a golden dragon embroidered on it. It looked as if he was a king who's sending off a general who's about to embark on a great campaign with a feast.

Princess DanFeng also looked more dazzling and beautiful as well.

She filled the empty cup in front of Lu XiaoFeng herself. "We feel that only this kind of drinking has that manly bravado," she said coquettishly. "No girl likes those men that drink wine as if they were drinking poison."

The Golden Roc Emperor straighten up his face: "Are you saying girls like alcoholics?"

Princess DanFeng's eyes twinkled: "There are certainly a little bit of bad points about drinking."

"Only a little bit?" The Golden Roc Emperor asked.

"Like when a person drinks too much," Princess DanFeng replied. "Then when he gets old, his legs will develop problems and he won't be able to drink anymore. So then whenever he sees other people drinking he would get angry. Getting angry often isn't a good thing you know."

The Golden Roc Emperor tried to keep a straight face before finally giving up: "Tell you the truth, when I was young I used to drink like I was pouring as well. And I guarantee you that it was not a bit slower than your pouring."

All smart hosts know that the best way to treat a guest is not with great food or great wine, but with laughter.

So all guests should know exactly how to make their hosts feel that their laughter was worth while.

Lu XiaoFeng poured another cup of wine into his stomach. "I'm going to go look for XiMen ChuiXue first thing tomorrow morning," he suddenly said.

"Great!" the Golden Roc Emperor replied.

"This guys is weird," Lu XiaoFeng continued. "I have to go myself to try and convince him in order for him to get involved. Zhu Ting, on the other hand, is another matter."

He reached into his shirt and took out a piece of crumpled and dirty paper. He laid it out on the table and, with a chopstick and some soy-sauce, drew a picture of a flying phoenix. "Send anyone you got to him with this piece of paper," he said as he handed the paper over to Princess DanFeng. "He would then come with that person."

"I heard the 2 of you haven't talked to each other for a long time." Princess DanFeng doesn't quite believe him.

"I'm not going to talk to him," Lu XiaoFeng replied. "I'm just telling him to come here. Two completely different things."

"So, he won't talk to you," Princess DanFeng stared at him in disbelief. "But, upon seeing your 'signature', he would follow a complete stranger to a completely unfamiliar place?"

"Without any hesitation."

"I guess you can count this Mr. Zhu as another weirdo." Princess DanFeng cracked up and observed.

"He's not just a weirdo, he's an a\$\$h01es!"

Princess DanFeng smoothed out that crumpled up paper. Only then did she realize that this worn out and dirty sheet of paper was a bank note for 5000 tael.

"Is this bank note legitimate?" She couldn't help but ask.

"You think I stole it?"

Princess DanFeng blushed.

"I was only afraid that since you 2 were such great friends that maybe this method of inviting him would anger him."

"No, it won't!" Lu XiaoFeng replied before letting out a little laugh. "The only good thing about him is that no matter how much money you give him, he'll never get mad at you."

"That's because he's not a hypocrite," Princess DanFeng replied with a smile, "and neither are you."

If you knew that a friend of yours was starving because he was poor but still complimented him for being a man of iron will and great pride that would rather die before resorting to beg.

If you knew that a friend of yours need a little money from you but instead only sent him a letter telling him everything is alright and how great of a thing for him to struggle through all of this is.

If you are really this kind of person, then I can guarantee that your only friend is yourself.

ShangGuan DanFeng wasn't such a person, so she obviously have already understood what Lu XiaoFeng meant.

Other than a pretty face, she actually has a very understanding and sympathetic heart. It's truly rare to find a girl possessing both qualities.

Only the smartest girls know that understanding and sympathy will forever be more attractive than even the most beautiful of faces.

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly realized that he seemed to be liking this girl more and more. So much so that even now, he's thinking about her.

It's close to midnight and no lamp was lit in the room. The spring winds gently breezed in through the windows, carrying in and filling the room with the slight fragrance of the flowers outside.

Lu XiaoFeng was laying on the bed all by himself, but his eyes were still wide open.

What's he doing up so late? Is he waiting for someone?

He wasn't waiting for Hua ManLou, obviously, since the 2 of them had just parted ways.

The night was quiet. So quiet that you could almost hear the dew drops dripping off the flower petals. So quiet that he heard the footsteps in the hall way.

The steps were very light, and very slow. But his heart suddenly started to beat like crazy instead. By now the steps had stopped outside of his door.

The door wasn't locked as a person gently pushed it open and gently closed it.

The room was dark, so dark that there was no way to make out what the person looked like.

But Lu XiaoFeng did not ask who the person was. It was as if he already knew who she was.

This time, the footsteps were even lighter and slower than before; slowly approaching his bed, slowly stroking his face gently.

Her hand was cold but soft, and carried with it a slight fragrance of freshly cut flowers.

She felt his mustaches and proved to herself that the person lying in bed was really Lu XiaoFeng.

Lu XiaoFeng had just heard the sound of cloth hitting the floor when he felt a naked body crawl under his bed covers.

Her body had been cold and soft, but suddenly it had turned red-hot. And on top of that she was shaking, as if she was a flickering flame, exciting Lu XiaoFeng the point that his throat clugged up. Only after a long while did he finally manage a light sigh.

"I warned you before," He muttered, "I can't resist temptation. Why did you still come?"

She didn't reply. Her body began shaking even more.

He couldn't resist rolling over and grabbed her tight within his arms. Her silk like skin was immediately covered with goosebumps, like the little whirls in water when the Spring wind breezes over it.

Her chest was pressed tightly up against his chest. Her chest was like a dove, tender and delicate.

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly pushed her off.

"You are not... who are you?" He uttered out of shock.

She still wasn't willing to speak, but her body had curled up.

Lu XiaoFeng reached out again. As soon as he touched her chest, he snapped back again like he was electricuted.

"You are the little older cousin!"

"And I know you are my little younger cousin." She finally had to give in and admitted it with a little laugh.

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly jumped up like an arrow.

"What are you doing here?" He demanded.

"Why can't I come here?" ShangGuan Xue-Er shot back. "Who did you think I was just then?"

From her tone, it seemed like she was mad.

Perhaps nothing makes a girl madder than being mistaken for someone else while getting friendly with a man.

Lu XiaoFeng is usually pretty good in talking himself out of situations like this. But he really can't think of anything to say.

"So she can come," ShangGuan Xue-Er continued after a snicker, "Why can't I? Tell me!"

"Because," Lu XiaoFeng finally replied with a sigh of resignation, "next to you, I look like an old man."

"I came here entirely because I wanted to prove to you once and for all that I'm not a kid anymore so you would believe me and not think of me as a liar! You really think that I like you? Don't flatter yourself!"

Her voice was getting gradually louder as she got angrier and angrier, as if she was almost about to cry.

Lu XiaoFeng reached over and gently stroked her hair, trying to think of something comforting to say...

Suddenly, the door was pushed open and the dark room suddenly lit up.

A person was standing in the doorway with a lantern in hand, wearing a snow white robe, but her face was even more pale than her robe.

ShangGuan DanFeng.

Lu XiaoFeng felt like just crawling underneath the bed and stay there. He just couldn't take the look that she has when she looked at him.

ShangGuan Xue-Er looked a kid that was caught stealing cookies out of the jar in the middle of the act.

But she immediately held her chest high, stood up naked, looked over at Lu XiaoFeng with her lips curled, and smiled.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier that she was coming?" She said. "I could have left sooner you know."

ShangGuan DanFeng stared at her, so mad that even her lips began to quiver. She wanted to say something, but just couldn't.

Xue-Er had already put on her robe. With her head held high, she walked by right in front of her. Suddenly, he curled her lips and smiled some more.

"You really don't need to be mad at all." She said. "All men are like this."

ShangGuan DanFeng did not move, nor did she reply. It was almost as if her entire body was petrified. Slowly and gradually, Xue-Er's footsteps disappeared into the distance.

ShangGuan DanFeng still stood there, motionless, starring at Lu XiaoFeng. Her beautiful eyes seemed to contain a slight hint of tears.

"This is good," she muttered, "I finally get to see what kind of person you really are." She stumped her foot on the floor, and turned around.

But Lu XiaoFeng was already by her side and pulled her to a stop.

"What... What more do you have to say for yourself?" She bit her lips

and demanded.

"I don't really shouldn't need to say anything," Lu XiaoFeng sighed.
"Because you should know that I was waiting for you."

ShangGuan DanFeng looked down at the floor. Only after a long wait did she finally let out a sigh.

"I had came here for you."

"And now?"

"And now.... now I'm going to leave."

She suddenly looked up and stared at him. Her eyes were filled with a kind of complicated and conflicting expression, somewhere between reprove and sympathy.

"Do you really belive that I would...." Lu XiaoFeng said before she stopped him by gently putting her finger on his lips.

"I know you wouldn't," she said. "But tonight... I can't stay here tonight."

Nobody would be interested in doing other things after witnessing a scene like that.

Lu XiaoFeng understood, so he loosened his grip and let her go.

ShangGuan DanFeng looked at him. Suddenly, she got on her tip toes and gently kissed him on the cheek.

"And you should know that I really don't want to go."

"But now you better leave as fast as you can," Lu XiaoFeng suddenly smiled. "Or else I might...."

She didn't wait for him to finish before pushing herself out of his arms. But she still had to turn around.

"I'm warning you," she said with a laugh, "That little girl is a devil. The next time you see her you better leave as fast as you can as well. I'll bite when I'm jealous."

The night was even more still and quiet. The world seemed to be completely peaceful and calm.

But is the human heart?

Morning. The cobblestoned road had just been heated up by the sun, some of the little shops on the side of the road hadn't even opened yet.

There's always a couple of people that hadn't got used to that working at sunrise lifestyle in the cities.

Princess DanFeng only turned back after she had drove them all the way out here in her flower-filled carriage.

"As soon as we find any news, we'll inform you."

"I know, I'll wait for you."

"I'll wait for you," with a girl like this waiting for you, what else could a man possibly want in life?

"You know, I think one of these days she's going to end up biting you at least once no matter what." Hua ManLou commented.

Lu XiaoFeng shot him a look before finally succumbing to a laugh: "Your ear must be way better than a rabbit's, next time I better keep that in mind."

Hua ManLou smiled back: "That little devil that she talked about, is she ShangGuan FeiYan's little sister?"

"I challenge you to find another little devil her in this world," Lu XiaoFeng responded with forced smile. Hua ManLou remained quiet.

"Has she found her older sister?" He finally had to ask.

"Doesn't seem like she has, I probably should have asked ShangGuan DanFeng about it jst then. Maybe she knows where that swallow of yours

flew off to."

{FeiYan means flying swallow in Chinese.}

Hua ManLou laughed a little at that remark before replying: "I think it's best that you don't ask, or else she might give you a nice little bite for asking."

"Although I didn't ask her, Xue-Er should have already asked her."

"Seems like she didn't get anything out of it." Hua ManLou observed. Even though he's still smiling, his face couldn't cover up the fact that he was worried.

Lu XiaoFeng thought for a while before suddenly asking: "Do you know how old ShangGuan FeiYan is?"

"She told me that she was born in the Year of the Goat, making her 18 years old."

Lu XiaoFeng stroked his mustache with his fingers and muttered to himself: "Can an 18 years old girl have a 12 years old older sister?"

"Depends on the situation," Hua ManLou answered with a smile.

Lu XiaoFeng was quite taken aback by that remark. "What situation?" he asked.

"If a person as smart as you can start asking questions as dumb as that, then why couldn't an 18 years old girl have a 20 years old younger sister? That 20 years old younger sister of hers will probably have an 80 years old son too."

Lu XiaoFeng laughed at that as well, then he suddenly patted Hua ManLou's shoulder rather forcibly and said: "There's no way an 18 years older sister could have a 20 years old younger sister and there's no way that ShangGuan FeiYan is in danger."

"Oh?"

"There's a chance that Xue-Er knows exactly where her older sister is and is just saying all those things to mess with me. But now I know that you can't trust a single word she says."

Hua ManLou let out another little laugh and then, as if he doesn't want to talk about this matter anymore, he suddenly changed the subject: "You said you came here to look for a person?"

Lu XiaoFeng nodded.

"XiMen ChuiXue doesn't seem to be here though."

"He's not here, I'm looking for someone else."

"Who?"

"You don't wonder the outside world very often, so you might not know about these 2 really weird old men. One of them knows a little bit everything that's ever happened. The other one is a little better, no matter how hard of a problem you have, he could help you solve it."

"You are talking about Know-It-All and Smart Guy?"

"Oh you know about them?"

"I might be blind, but I'm not deaf."

Lu XiaoFeng had a rather wily smile on his face and commented:
"Sometimes I wish you were a bit more deaf."

By now they have walked underneath the shades of an overhang from one of the buildings. A proper looking monk with his head held low and looking down was walking head on into them.

This monk's face was rather square and his ears were big, the signs of someone with a lot of good fortune. But his clothes were dirty and torn, and that pair of straw sandals on his feet were just about all worn down.

Lu XiaoFeng ran up to the monk as soon as he saw him. With a smile, he said: "Hello Honest Monk!"

Honest Monk lifted his head up and smiled when he saw Lu XiaoFeng:

"Have you been a bit more honest lately?"

"The day you stop being honest is the day that I'll start being honest."

It seemed that all Honest Monk could do when they meet is to force a smile on his face.

"You seem especially happy today, do you have some happy news?" Lu XiaoFeng continued.

"How could Honest Monk have any happy news? Only dishonest guys like you do." Honest Monk answered with a forced smile.

"But today seems to be an exception."

Honest Monk frowned before finally letting out a sigh: "Today really is an exception."

From the look on his face, anyone could tell that he does not want Lu XiaoFeng to ask him anymore questions.

"Why?" Pity Lu XiaoFeng didn't seem to have caught on.

"Because... because I just did something that wasn't very honest and proper," Honest Monk mutter with a sorry look on his face.

He didn't want to say it, but he had to say it, because he's an honest

monk.

Which was why Lu XiaoFeng got even more curious and had to ask even further: "You could actually do something that's not honest and proper?"

"This is the first time in my life," Honest Monk replied.

Lu XiaoFeng got even more curious as he lowered his voice: "What did you do?"

"I just went to find OuYang." Honest Monk's face seemed to be a little red as he muttered his reply.

"Who's OuYang?"

Honest Monk stared at him, his expression suddenly turned really strange, as if he was a bit proud of himself for knowing something as well as feeling sorry for Lu XiaoFeng's naivette. He shook his head and asked: "How could you not know who OuYang is?"

"Why should I know?"

"Because OuYang is OuYang Qing," Honest Monk whispered.

"And who might OuYang Qing be?"

Honest Monk's face turned even redder as he stuttered out: "She's a..."

a... very famous... prostitute."

He seemed to have had to summon up every last bit of his strength to make that last word come out.

Lu XiaoFeng almost stumbled and fell from the shock. In his wildest dreams he could not imagine Honest Monk actually going to find a prostitute.

But even though he was shocked and laughing on the inside, his face was calm as can be. He actually was able to casually comment: "Actually that's not really a big deal, this kind of stuff happens all the time."

This time it's Honest Monk's turn to be shocked: "This kind of stuff happens all the time?"

With a straight face, Lu XiaoFeng replied: "Monks don't got wives, not to mention no consorts, everyone of them are strong and healthy, what would they do if they can't go to prostitutes? Go for some nuns?"

Honest Monk was speechless.

"Besides, "High Monk" and "Famed Prostitutes" are very closely related," Lu XiaoFeng continued.

"How?" Honest Monk had to ask.

"High Monk spend an entire day as a monk banging a bell, Famed

Prostitutes spend an entire bell cycle banging a monk. How much closer related can you be?" He was already doubled over with laughter even before he finished the joke.

But Honest Monk was so furious that he did not know what to do next as all he could do was stare at him blankly. After a long while, he finally let out a sigh and muttered: "Merciful Buddha, why did you have me meet Big Shot Sun last night and Lu XiaoFeng today?"

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly stopped laughing: "You saw Big Shot Sun? Where is he? I'm looking for him."

But Honest Monk did not seem to hear him at all. He just kept on reciting sutras to himself: "Amida Buddha, I'll never ever do any bad things ever again. I deserve to die for my sins, Bodhisattva should punish me to crawling back to the temple."

He just kept reciting as he suddenly got down on all fours and actually started to crawl away.

All Lu XiaoFeng was look at him crawl away with a frozen smile on his face.

Hua ManLou couldn't help but walk over and ask: "Is he really crawling?"

Lu XiaoFeng sighed: "If he said he was going to crawl 10 miles, then there's no way that he would crawl only 9 and 1/2, because he is an honest monk."

"Looks like he's not only an honest monk, he's a crazy one too." Hua ManLou observed with a laugh.

"But he's only pretending to be crazy, because he knows better than anyone what's going on."

"So who might Big Shot Sun be?"

As soon as the subject of Big Shot Sun came up, Lu XiaoFeng's spirit picked up again: "Actually, Big Shot Sun's real name should be 'Mr. Big Shot Grandson of a Turtle'."

{Sun is part of Sun-Zi, which is Chinese for grandson.}

Hua ManLou let out another laugh and asked: "How did he get that name?"

"Because he always say that when he's broke he's a Grandson of a Turtle and when he's rich he's a Mr. Big Shot. Coincidentally his surname just happened to be Sun, so people just decided to call him Big Shot Sun."

"You seem to know quite a lot of this weirdoes," joked Hua ManLou.

"Know-It-All and Smart Guy are 2 weirdoes too, nobody has ever seen them, nor does anyone know where they are. Other than Big Shot Sun, nobody could find them."

"Who knew that this Big Shot Sun can actually do a couple of things?"

"He's been drinking and gambling ever since he was a little kid. Spending his life wondering and playing, he's never done a single serious thing in his entire life and couldn't really do anything really well either. But because of this one thing he could do, he's able to waste half of his life just play around completely free of care."

"How come?"

"Because if one wants to find Know-It-All and Smart Guy, then one has to go and buy him out from where ever he is."

"Buy him out? Why do you have to do that?"

"This guy is better at spending money than anyone else in the world. Hence he's never Mr. Big Shot for more than 3 days at a time before he becomes Grandson of a Turtle again. When he couldn't pay the bills anymore, he would just put himself down and wait for someone to come around and pay off his debts. He has actually spent 10 years living like that! Admiration is not a strong enough word for how I feel towards him."

"Seems like his person not only can do a couple of things, he's very lucky as well."

"Exactly. An unlucky person would go crazy in no time living like he does."

"So are you going to go and buy him out now?"

"Of course I have to go find OuYang first."

"OuYang?"

With a smile, Lu XiaoFeng casually replied: "How could you not even know OuYang? OuYang is...."

OuYang Qing. The first name listed on sign out in front of Pavillion of Fortunate Love.

It's been said that the best thing about her is that no matter who you are, be it a monk or a cripple, she would treat you as if you were the most dashing man in the world, as long as you got money. In her profession, that's all one really needs.

Besides, she wasn't ugly either, white and clean face, ebony colored hair, and when she smiles dimples appears on both of her cheeks. And that pair of eyes always staring at you with that look that make you feel justified to spend all your money on her.

At this moment she's staring at Lu XiaoFeng with that look, staring at his mustache, as if she had never seen such a handsome man, such a beautiful mustache.

Lu XiaoFeng was feeling a little lightheaded from that stare and the

banknotes in his pocket seemed like they were about to bust out of his pocket.

OuYang Qing's smile got even sweeter: "You have never been here before have you?"

"Never," Lu XiaoFeng replied.

"And you asked for me as soon as you got here?"

"The first one I asked for was you!"

OuYang Qing looked down at the ground and said softly: "If that's the case, then maybe this was meant to happen."

"Without a doubt!"

OuYang Qing's eyes flashed: "But how did you know that I was here?"

"A god told me in a dream this morning that we were destined to be together all the way back 800 years ago."

OuYang Qing let out a little laugh at that: "Really?"

"Absolutely true! That god was a monk, looked pretty honest and proper, and said that he himself had asked for you too."

OuYang Qing's expression didn't even change as she coyly replied: "There really was a monk here last night, he just sat there and looked at me for an entire night after I got in bed. I had no idea he was a god and thought there was something wrong with him."

She suddenly walked over and sat down in Lu XiaoFeng's lap. Stroking Lu XiaoFeng's mustache, she bit her lip and smiled: "But you better not try and copy him regarding that point."

"I'm no god."

OuYang Qing put her head beside his and gently bit his ear. With a small laughter, she replied: "Actually, being a god isn't all it's cracked up to be. Just tell your friend to leave and I can make you feel so much better than a god."

Hua ManLou had been smiling all this time, sitting quietly at a rather remote corner of the room. He seemed to had enough of this chirade and suddenly cut in: "We are here to look for Big Shot Sun, do you know where he is?"

"Big Shot Sun? Heard that he's over at the Xiao Xiang Pavillion next door waiting for someone to buy him out. It'll be right in front of you just as you get out," OuYang Qing replied. She seemed to be hoping that Hua MuLan would leave as soon as possible.

But the first one to stand up was Lu XiaoFeng.

"You are going too?" OuYang Qing frowned.

"I don't really want to go," Lu XiaoFeng sighed, "but I have to go."

"Going to buy him out?"

"No, to wait for someone to buy us out together."

He patted his pocket and said with a forced smile on his face: "To tell you the truth, the money we got left isn't even enough to buy a cookie."

Although OuYang Qing was still smiling, it had turned into a different kind of smile. The kind that makes you want to leave as soon as you laid your eyes upon it.

But Lu XiaoFeng didn't seem to notice, he suddenly smiled: "But since we were meant to be, how could I leave? I think it's best if we let him...."

OuYang Qing immediately cut him off: "Since we are meant to be, then we will surely meet again. I think it's best if you go and find him right now. I... I suddenly don't feel so good, my stomach is hurting."

Lu XiaoFeng walked over, took a deep breath in the Spring breeze coming from the East, and smiled: "If you want to get rid of a girl, the best way to do it is to make her tummy ache. Any man that goes out often should know at least 3 different ways of making a girl's tummy hurt."

"I always knew you were quite smart," Hua ManLou casually replied,

"but only today did I realize that you are not a good man at all."

"Why?"

"You knew what kind of woman she is, why did you still have to expose her for what she is back there?"

"Because I never liked people who fake their feelings."

"But she can't not fake her feelings, she has to survive. How could she continue to live in this kind of place if she gets real feelings for everyone?"

With a smile on his face, Hua ManLou continued: "You are a great friend, very loyal, maybe almost good enough to be called a knight-errant, but you have a huge flaw."

All Lu XiaoFeng could do was listen.

Hua ManLou continued: "In this world, there are a lot of people that are very evil and despicable. But sometimes they couldn't help but do what they did, sometimes they are forced to do it. Your biggest flaw is that you have never thought things out from their perspective."

Lu XiaoFeng stared at him. Stared at him for a long time. Only then did he gently sigh and said: "Sometimes, I really don't like being with you."

"Oh?"

"Because I always figured that I'm not that bad of a guy, but when compared to you, I'm almost an a\$\$hole."

Hua ManLou smiled: "As long as a person knows that he's an a\$\$hole, there's still hope for him."

"I'm an a\$\$hole! A 'Grade A' a\$\$hole! You won't find another a\$\$hole like me in a crowd of a million!" As soon as they walked into XiaoXiang Pavillion, they could hear a person screaming upstairs.

"Big Shot Sun?" Hua ManLou inquired.

Lu XiaoFeng laughed: "Correct! Not many people know how much of an a\$\$hole they themselves are."

"That's why there's still hope from him," Hua ManLou laughed as well.

Luckily, although he could not stand up, Big Shot Sun could still sit up.

So here he is, sitting straight up inside the horse carriage that Lu XiaoFeng had just rented, staring straight at Lu XiaoFeng: "I know you must be in a great hurry to go find those 2 weirdoes, but you still should at least drink a couple of cups with me."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed and replied: "I still can't understand it, those people knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that you got no money whatsoever, yet they still served you drinks!"

A devilish smile appeared on Big Shot Sun's face: "Because they know that sooner or later a big head with a lot of problems like you would come and bail me out."

Actually his head wasn't really any smaller than anyone else's. If you hadn't seen him, there was no way that you could have imagined a man with such a small and frail built could have such a big head.

"Can you still find them any time soon in this condition?" Lu XiaoFeng inquired.

"Of course!" Big Shot Sun proudly announced. "No matter how weird those 2 weirdoes get, they just can't seem to do anything to me. But we need to set up some ground rules first, 3 ground rules, to be exact."

"Alright."

"50 taels of silver for every question, and I'm talking about 100%, no impurities type whatsoever, type of silver ingots. When I go in, you 2 have to stay outside. And when the time comes for questions, you have to ask outside."

"I don't get it," Lu XiaoFeng said with a wry smile. "Why don't they ever want to meet anyone?"

Big Shot Sun smiled again: "Because they feel that, other than me, everyone in the world is a bastard. The irony is that I'm the biggest bastard in the world!"

The cave was dark and damp. The entrance was very small, the only way can get in is to crawl. And that's exactly what Big Shot Sun did.

Lu XiaoFeng and Hua ManLou had been waiting outside for a long time now, Lu XiaoFeng was getting very impatient.

But Hua ManLou smiled and commented: "I know you are getting impatient, but why don't you look around for a bit? It's so beautiful around here, even the wind makes you feel great when it breezes by you. To be able to stop here for a while is really a very fortunate thing."

"And how do you know that it's beautiful around here?" Lu XiaoFeng wondered.

"Although I can't see, I can still feel and understand it. That's why I always feel that only those with eyes but refuses to see are truly blind."

Lu XiaoFeng couldn't find anything to say in response.

It was at this moment when Big Shot Sun's voice came from inside the cave: "Alright, you can start asking questions now."

The first 50 tael-silver ingot was tossed in and the first question was: "Was there really a Golden Roc Dynasty about 50 years ago?"

After a pause, an old and raspy voice inside the cave answered:
"Golden Roc Dynasty is originally in a very small country in the far South. Their customs were very different, marriages were between people of the same surnames. So most of the people in its Imperial Court had the surname of ShangGuan. Even though the dynasty was old and prosperous, it collapsed about 50 years ago. It has been rumored that its descendents has wondered into the Central Plains."

Lu XiaoFeng exhaled, seemingly satisfied with the answer he got. So he tossed another silver ingot in and asked the 2nd question: "Other than the royal descendents, were there any other survivors of note from its Imperial Court?"

"It's been said that there were 4 of them that was ordered to protect their heir on his way over here. One of them was another royal relative, his name was ShangGuan Jin. The other 3 were General Ping DuHe, Commander ShangGuan Mu, and Warden of the Treasury Yan LiBen."

There is still a little bit more to add to the answer: "The different positions in their country were very similar to the same positions in our country."

The third question was: "So what happened to them?"

"They probably had all changed their names and went into hiding after they arrived here. When the new dynasty was established, they no doubt sent out assassins in hopes of killing off all the left overs of the last dynasty. But they were unable to find anyone. If the heir to the throne back then is still alive, he's probably an old man now."

After thinking deeply for a long time, Lu XiaoFeng finally asked the 4th question: "If there's a really difficult matter that has to require the help of XiMen ChuiXue, is there any way to get him to help?"

The question was followed by an even longer silence. Finally, the 4 word answer came: "None what so ever."

"Spring Woods" in the city was world famous for their excellent Bamboo Green, Garlic Beef, 5-Plumed Pigeon, and Sauteed Goat with Fish. That's why they were at Spring Woods.

Lu XiaoFeng was a very picky and very knowledgeable eater.

"None what so ever"! What kind of an answer is that?" Lu XiaoFeng said with a forced smile and downed a cup of Bamboo Green. "This entire table of food cost about 5 taels at the most, and that little son of a devil's answer was 50!"

"Does that really mean that there's no way?" Hua ManLou asked with a casual smile on his face.

"XiMen ChuiXue has money, got fame, and is about as much of a loner as you can get: he's never ever gotten into other people's business." Lu XiaoFeng replied. "Add that to the fact that he treats his relatives the same way he treats strangers and the fact that he is about as arrogant as you can get, can you think of a way to deal with this guy?"

"But sometimes he would travel 3000 kilometers to avenge someone he has never met before."

"That's because he wanted to. If he doesn't want to, even the Jade Emperor himself can't move him!"

{Jade Emperor is the supreme deity in the traditional Chinese mythology, a character not unlike Zeus in Greek mythology.}

Hua ManLou smiled: "No matter what, at least this trip wasn't completely in vain. We did manage to find out that what the Golden Roc Emperor told us wasn't a lie."

"Precisely because what he said wasn't a lie, that's why we have to get involved in this matter. And precisely because we have to get involved, that's why we must need XiMen ChuiXue."

"Is his sword skill really as frightening as the rumors say?"

"Maybe more. Since the first time he fought at the age of 15 until now, nobody has made it out alive from a fight with him."

"Why must we need him?"

"Because we are not up against just anybody, and there's more than one of them."

Lu XiaoFeng downed another cup and continued: "If DuGu YiHe really is

the Boss of Green Shirt Pavilion, then there's at least 5 or 6 very troublesome people under him. Besides, E'Mei Sect is filled with great kungfu masters to begin with."

"I have also heard about the 7 Swords of E'Mei, 3 Valiants and 4 Beauties, being among the best of the best of the next generation of swordsmen."

{The 7 Swords of E'Mei is known as the "3 Ying 4 Xiu" this phrase is developed some more as the story progresses.}

"Yan TieShan's Pearl and Diamond Pavilion's warden Huo TianQing is even more troublesome than all 7 of them added together. He's not that old, but somehow he's got a lot of seniority, it's rumored that even the great Hero Shan XiYan has to call him 'Master-Uncle'!"

"Why would he be working under Yan LiBen?"

"Because a couple of years ago he was ambushed and almost killed by somebody on top of Mount QiLian when Yan LiBen saved his life."

"And Huo Xiu as the tendency to disappear for long periods of time, all his fortunes must have been left in the care of some very reliable people. Obviously they can't be all that easy to deal with either." Hua ManLou observed.

"Exactly right."

"So that's why we have to get XiMen ChuiXue."

"Right again."

"Can't we try and psych him into this? By saying let's find out who's the best among all these kungfu masters?"

"No way!"

"Why not?"

"Because not only can't you convince him to do anything the easy way or the hard way, he's also smart as hell, just like me."

Lu XiaoFeng laughed a little at the remark and continued: "If someone wants to psych me into doing something, I can tell you right now he's going to fail."

Hua ManLou sat there silently for a long time before he slow spoke: "I think I have an idea, maybe we can give it a try."

"What kind of an idea?"

Hua ManLou didn't have the chance to tell his idea when there came a disturbance and a series of screams at the front door.

A person had stumbled in, a person covered in blood.

The April sun was just slightly to the West for it was just passed noon. The sunlight came pouring in through sideways onto this man, onto his blood-covered body, causing it to shine red, so red that it chills a person to the bone.

The blood was pouring out from 17 or 18 different places; his forehead, his nose, his ears, his eyes, his mouth, his throat, his chest, his wrist, his knees, both of his shoulders, were all gushing blood.

Even Lu XiaoFeng had never seen anyone with so many wounds, this was the kind of stuff that nobody ever even dares to think about.

This person had saw him as well, suddenly rushed to in front of him, and grabbed his shoulders using those 2 blood covered hands of his. "Ge... ge...." It seemed like he was trying to say something.

But he couldn't utter a single word, because his throat had been practically sliced in half. But he was still alive.

Was this a miracle? Or was it because he wanted to say one sentence to Lu XiaoFeng before he dies?

Lu XiaoFeng stared at that disfigured face and suddenly shouted out: "Xiao QiuYu!"

"Ge... ge...." Xiao QiuYu's throat was still making those noises. His blood covered eyes were filled with horror, anger, and hatred.

"Do you want to tell me something?" Lu XiaoFeng asked.

Xiao QiuYu nodded. Then suddenly, he let out a huge, desperate howl; a howl of a once proud wolf, lonely and wounded, just before he gives in and falls onto the snow covered ground.

Suddenly, his entire body twitched, as if someone just hit him from behind with an invisible whip.

What he wanted to tell Lu XiaoFeng was obviously a terrifying secret, but he could never utter a single word ever again.

By the time he hit the floor, his limbs had all curled back into his body because of the pain. His bright red blood was already turning into a deeper and deeper shade of purple.

Lu XiaoFeng stomped his feet and jumped. His huge body, like a huge eagle, flew over 4 or 5 tables, over all the people's heads, and out of the front door.

On the slab-stoned street, there was a trail of blood that went all the way from the center of the street to the door.

"There had just been a carriage shooting down the street, that person had fell out of that carriage."

"What kind of carriage was it?"

"Black, and the people driving it were wearing green."

"Which way were they headed?"

"West."

Lu XiaoFeng did not say another word and began running in the direction of the sun. After making it pass another big street, he heard another huge commotion and scream coming from the intersection to his left.

An ebony black carriage had just crashed into a medicine shop, knocking down several people and a couple of tables.

By now the horse had already fell down onto the ground, white foam was already spilling out of its mouth.

The person driving the carriage fell down as well, at the corner of his mouth was blood. Dark purple colored blood that fell drop by drop onto his shirt.

His green colored shirt. His face was concorted as well; suddenly, his pale yello face turned dead black as well.

Lu XiaoFeng swung open the carriage door. Resting on the seat inside the carriage was actually a pair of silver hooks.

The silver hooks had a yellowish cloth attached to it, much like the type used by Taoist priest to call the souls of the dead. Words had just been

written on it, in fresh blood: "An Eye for an Eye!"

"This is what happens to those who meddle with other's business!"

The silver hooks shone brightly in the sun.

Hua ManLou gently felt the tip of the hook. "You said these are Soul Hooker's hooks?" He asked in a slow and soft voice.

Lu XiaoFeng nodded.

"And Soul Hooker died by Xiao QiuYu's hands?"

"An Eye for an Eye!" Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"But that other sentence is obviously a warning to us to stay out of this."

"Green Shirt Pavilion's intelligence are pretty fast, but too bad they can't judge people," Lu XiaoFeng observed with a bitter and cold laugh.

"They really did misjudge you," Hua ManLou sighed too. "Green Shirt Pavilion shouldn't have been so stupid as to do this, do they really believe they can scare you?"

"This is good for only one person."

"Who?"

"Golden Roc Emperor!"

There are people in this world that was born with this weird, unflexible chip on their shoulders; the more you try and scare him and not let him do something, the more he has to do it. Lu XiaoFeng was one of this kind of people.

So right now even if you put 180 sharp sabres on his throat, you still couldn't stop him from meddling with this business.

He grasped the silver hooks tightly and suddenly got up: "Come on! Let's go get XiMen ChuiXue right now. I have just thought of a way to get him too."

"How?"

"If he's not willing to help out, then I'm going burn down his Thousand-Plums Mansion!"

Chapter 5 - Singing voices from far away

There wasn't any plums at the Thousand Plums Mansion.

It was April, peach flowers and cuckoos covered the mountainside.

Facing an entire world covered with flowers, Hua ManLou seemed as if he wanted to just stay here forever. An indescribable look suddenly appeared on that calm and peaceful face of his, the kind of look that young girls get when they see their first loves walking towards them.

But Lu XiaoFeng couldn't wait any longer: "I don't want to kill the atmosphere, but once it turns dark, XiMen ChuiXue would not meet any guests."

"Not even you?"

"Not even the King of Heavens himself."

"What if he's not there?"

"He has to be there. He only leaves 4 times a year at the most, and that's only when he's off to kill someone."

"So he only kills 4 people a year at the most?"

"And they all deserve to be killed."

"Who deserves to be killed? Who decides they deserve to be killed?"

Hua ManLou suddenly sighed before continuing: "You go ahead, I think I'll wait here for you."

Lu XiaoFeng did not say another word, because he understood this friend of his very well.

Nobody has ever seen Hua ManLou angry or mad, but once he made up his mind, nobody has ever been able to persuade him otherwise either.

He turned towards the flowered-covered mountainside and slowly suggested: "When you see him, try my way first, then try yours."

There wasn't a single flower in the room, yet it was filled with the fragrance of flowers; faint and simple, just like XiMen ChuiXue.

Lu XiaoFeng sat sideways on a soft chair made from vines, and stared at him. The cup was filled with light green wine. The white shirt he was wearing was light and soft.

Faintly, wave after wave, a flute, seeming close yet far away, with a sound that felt softer than the softest of Spring breezes can be heard; but

the flute player was nowhere to be seen.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed: "In your entire life, have you ever been troubled?"

"No," XiMen ChuiXue replied.

"Is there a thing in this world that you can't have?"

"No again."

"Are you really completely satisfied?"

"Because I really don't ask for that much," XiMen ChuiXue casually replied.

"And that's why you have never asked anyone else for a favor?"

"Never."

"And that's why when others come to you, you are never willing to help them."

"Never."

"No matter who, no matter what, you are never going to help?"

"What I'm going to do is never based upon what others ask of me, this is the same to anybody and everybody."

"What if someone is going burn your house down?"

"Who would come and burn my house down?"

"Me."

XiMen ChuiXue laughed. He rarely laughed, so whenever he did laugh his face always had an indescribable hint of ridicule.

"I came here wanting to ask you to help me do something. I promised a person that if you don't help, then I'm going to burn your house, burn it down to ground." Lu XiaoFeng explained.

XiMen ChuiXue stared at him. After a long time, he slowly began to speak: "I don't have that many friends, the most ever at any particular time was 2 or 3, but you have always been my friend."

"And that's why I have come and asked for your help."

"And that's why whenever you want to burn down my house, you can go right ahead. You can start the fire where ever you want to start it as well." XiMen ChuiXue said casually.

Lu XiaoFeng was shocked, because he also understood this friend of his very well.

Every word this man said is like an arrow that's just been shot out: it's never going to be taken back.

"In the storage out back, I have some pinewood and kerosine, I suggest you start the fire there. And also do it at night, that kind of fire must be beautiful at night." XiMen ChuiXue said.

"Do you know of Know-It-All and Smart Guy?" Lu XiaoFeng suddenly asked.

"I have heard that there isn't a question in the world that they can't answer. Do they really know everything in the world?" XiMen ChuiXue replied coldly.

"You don't believe it?"

"You believe it?"

"I asked them if there was anyway to get you to help me. They told me there was none. At first, I didn't believe them, but now... Now it looks like they really do have you all figured out."

XiMen ChuiXue looked at Lu XiaoFeng silently. Suddenly he let out another little laugh and said: "Well this time they are wrong."

"Oh?"

"You do have a way of making me help you?"

"What way is that?"

XiMen ChuiXue smiled and said: "If you shave off that mustache of yours, I'll be willing to do anything you ask of me."

If Lu XiaoFeng had ran into some of his friends right now, they probably wouldn't recognize him.

Here was a person who was suppose to have 4 eyebrows, but now he only has 2; and where there used to be a mustache is now as smooth as a new born's skin. It's a shame that Hua ManLou couldn't see it.

Obviously, he couldn't see XiMen ChuiXue following Lu XiaoFeng; but nevertheless, he smiled and inquired: "Master XiMen?"

"Hua ManLou?" XiMen ChuiXue asked back.

Hua ManLou nodded: "I regret being born handicapped so that I could not see the best swordsman today in all his glory."

XiMen ChuiXue stared at him and suddenly asked: "Forgive me but... can you really not see?"

"I'm sure Master XiMen has heard that even though Hua ManLou has eyes, he's as blind as a bat."

"Then did you hear my footsteps?"

Just like DuGu Fang, he had to ask that question. He was just as proud of his lightness kungfu as he was of his sword skills, and he definitely should be proud of it.

"From what I know, there's at most 4 or 5 men in the world today that can actually walk without any sound at all. Master XiMen is one of them."

"But you knew I was here!"

Hua ManLou let out a little laugh: "That's because Master XiMen carries a certain aura of death!"

"An aura of death?"

"When one unsheath a sword, there's a certain aura that the sword gives out. How many men has Master XiMen killed? How can you not have an aura of death about you?" Hua ManLou casually replied.

"No wonder you didn't want to enter my house, turns out that you can't stand this deadly aura I have." XiMen ChuiXue coldly replied.

Hua ManLou smiled: "The flowers are so beautiful here, if Master XiMen could take some more of this beauty in, this deadly aura could slowly

disappear."

"Fresh flowers maybe beautiful, but how could it compare to the flower of blood when a person is killed?" XiMen ChuiXue observed coldly.

"Oh?"

XiMen ChuiXue's eyes suddenly looked different: "There will always be dishonest traitors in this world. When you thrust your sword through their throats, the flower of blood blossoms underneath your sword. If you can just see that fleeting moment of glory, then you would understand that there can be nothing in the world more beautiful."

He suddenly turned around and walked away without even looking back once.

The evening mist fell, as if the flowers suddenly covered themselves with a silk white sheet. His figure had just as suddenly disappeared into the mist.

Hua ManLou could not help but sigh and comment: "I finally understand how he could be so good at his kind of sword technique."

"Oh!"

"Because he really believes that killing is a sacred and divinely beautiful thing. He has already offered his life in service of that. It's only when he kills does he truly feel alive. All other times he's just waiting for the next time."

Lu XiaoFeng thought deeply for a bit before he too gently sighed:
"Luckily, all the people he killed deserved it."

Hua ManLou smiled and did not reply.

The endless night sky had suddenly engulfed the world.

The stars had just begin to appear. The beautiful yet distant waning moon hung down from a branch on some distant tree. The winds still carried a flowery fragrance, the night was beautiful and intoxicating.

Hua ManLou was slowly walking on the side of the mountain, having seemingly fallen into a beautiful and intoxicating dream.

But Lu XiaoFeng couldn't hold it in any longer: "Are you going to ask me whether or not my trip was successful?"

"I already know that you have already convinced him to join us," Hua ManLou said with a smile.

"You did? How?"

"He didn't ask you to stay nor did he say goodbye, and you didn't seem to mind at all. Obviously that's because you 2 had already set up a meeting place."

"And I bet you also know how I managed to do it?"

"My way, of course."

"Why do you say that?"

"He might be heartless, but you are not. He knows that you won't burn his house down; besides, even if you do, he wouldn't care."

Lu XiaoFeng laughed and then sighed: "No matter how amazing you are, there is something that you'll never be able to guess."

"And what's that?"

Lu XiaoFeng ran his fingers over where his mustache used to be: "Just guess, I'll tell you all about it when you get it right."

"If I got right, why would I need you to tell me about it?" Hua ManLou laughed and said.

Lu XiaoFeng laughed as well, but before he could respond, he suddenly realized that Hua ManLou's calm and peaceful smile had suddenly and instantaneously turned unspeakably stiff and strange.

"What's going on?" Lu XiaoFeng had to ask.

Hua ManLou didn't answer, and didn't hear his question. He seemed to be listening for a mysterious sound from far away, a sound that only he could hear.

He suddenly changed direction and began walking towards the back of the mountain.

All Lu XiaoFeng could do was follow him. The night became even darker and one by one, the stars disappeared behind the peak of the mountain.

Suddenly, he heard the far away singing too. The singing was indescribable, haunting, and heartbreakingly beautiful.

The lyrics were the same, beautiful, moving, and heartbreaking. It was about a young and passionate girl who was just about to die telling her lover about her life, about her heartbreaks and loneliness.

Lu XiaoFeng didn't really pay much attention to the lyrics, because at this moment he was puzzled by Hua ManLou's expression. So much so that he had to ask: "Have you heard of this song before?"

"Yes," Hua ManLou finally nodded after a long silence. "I've heard of it before?"

"From who?"

"ShangGuan FeiYan."

Lu XiaoFeng had often said that in this world, there were only about a dozen or so things that he had complete faith and trust in. Hua ManLou's ears just happen to be one of them.

When other people saw something with their very own eyes, sometimes they didn't really see it. But Hua ManLou's ears have never ever made a mistake.

So the singer had to be ShangGuan FeiYan.

How could this girl who had mysteriously disappeared suddenly appear here? And why would she be singing such a hauntingly beautiful song here, at night on an desolate mountainside?

Who was she singing the song for?

Could it be that she was just like the girl in the song? Telling her sad life's misfortunes and bitterness to her lover just before her impending death?

Lu XiaoFeng didn't ask any further, because a light had suddenly appeared in the darkness.

The singing was also coming from the direction of the flickering light.

Hua ManLou had already began to move, flying his way over the mountainside. Even though he couldn't see that lonely light, he was moving exactly at the direction of the light.

The light was getting closer and closer and Lu XiaoFeng was finally able to make out a little monastery. Was it built in honor of some mountain demon or an earth god?

The singing suddenly seized, the world suddenly turned unspeakably empty and silent.

Lu XiaoFeng shot a look at Hua ManLou. "If she was really singing to you," he had to say to convince himself, "she wouldn't leave just now."

But she did leave. The oil lamp was still lit inside the dark and damp monastery, but there was nobody in sight.

A black faced mountain demon was sitting on a vicious tiger with a iron staff in hand. In the faint and flickering light, it looked as if he was in the middle of beating down a bunch of evil-doers with his staff and carrying out justice for the good people of the land.

Laying on top of the offering table was an old and rusty bronze wash bowl. The bowl was filled with clean water, several strands of black hair was floating on the water.

"What are you looking at?" Hua ManLou asked.

"There's a wash bowl on the table, it's filled with water and there's some hair as well." Lu XiaoFeng answered.

"Hair?"

The hair was soft and still had a faint trace of that sweet smell that only young girls have.

"It's a girl's hair." Lu XiaoFeng concluded. "Seemed that a girl was just here singing and using this bowl of water as a mirror to comb her hair. But now she's gone."

Hua ManLou nodded slowly, as if he had figured out a long time ago that she wouldn't have waited here for him.

"In this place, at a time like this, she still had the urge to comb her hair? She's obviously a girl who likes to look as pretty as she can." Lu XiaoFeng continued.

"17, 18 year old girls, which one of them doesn't like to look pretty?"

"And is ShangGuan FeiYan just an 17, 18 year old girl?"

"She liked to look pretty to begin with anyways."

Lu XiaoFeng looked at Hua ManLou, and probed: "You have felt her hair before haven't you?"

Hua ManLou gave a laugh. There are many different kinds of laughter, this particular kind of laugh means admittance.

"Is this her hair?"

He believed that Hua ManLou's fingers were just as sensitive as his ears. He has seen, with his very own eyes, Hua ManLou be able to tell the validity of an artifact by simply touching it ever so slightly.

Hua ManLou was already holding that strand of hair in his hand and was gently running his fingers along its length. A very peculiar expression appeared on his face, it was neither joy nor sadness.

"Is this really her hair?"

Hua ManLou nodded.

"She was just sitting here and was even combing her hair and singing. Clearly, she's living quite well."

Hua ManLou gave another laugh. There are many different kinds of laughter, but this particular laugh was impossible to tell whether it was out of joy or sadness,

She was just here, so why didn't she wait for him? If she did not know he was here, then who else could she have been singing to.

Lu XiaoFeng secretly sighed to himself, he couldn't decide whether or not to console him or to pretend he didn't understand.

A gust of wind blew by and entered the room through the door. That

staff touting, tiger riding, black faced mountain demon statue suddenly began to crack. That 10 meter long staff of his suddenly fell apart.

Immediately, the huge statue began to fall apart as well, as it fell onto the floor, piece by piece.

With in the cloud of dust, Lu XiaoFeng suddenly realized that, on the wall behind the statue, there actually hung a man.

A dead man. The blood on his body wasn't even dry yet. An iron judge pen was stuck through his chest and nailed him onto the wall. Two pieces of paper like those used by Taoist priest to call the souls of the dead hung from the pen.

"An eye for an eye!"

"This is what happened to those who meddle with other's business!"

The same two sentences, written in blood, just like the other one. The blood seemed to have soaked through the papers.

DuGu Fang, not Liu YuHen. Those who wanted to die was still alive while those who wanted to live were dead.

"The statue had been smashed long before," Lu XiaoFeng observed with anger. "This dead man had been placed here just for us to see."

Hua ManLou's face was pale as death. He finally had to ask: "Is it

ShangGuan FeiYan?"

"It's DuGu Fang." Lu XiaoFeng replied. "I really didn't expect him to be the second one to be dead."

"What's he doing here? Why would ShangGuan FeiYan be here?" Hua ManLou was in deep thought. "Could she be kidnapped as well? Could she have fallen into the hands of the Green Shirt Pavilion?"

Lu XiaoFeng frowned: "Usually, you are a very open minded guy, but how come whenever it comes to her, you always think towards the worst of all possibilities?"

Hua ManLou was quiet for a long time before finally sighing: "Maybe it's because I care too muc about her."

When one cares too much about someone, it's hard to not think about the worst possibility, it's hard not to make it worse.

That's why the more one care about another, the easier misunderstandings arise, and the worse the time apart becomes.

Lu XiaoFeng forced a small laughter out and said: "No matter what, at least she's alive. How could anyone sing so beautifully if there was a sabre up against her neck?"

The song wasn't beautiful, because it was sang by Lu XiaoFeng.

"Life should be tasted to the end, and not spent facing the moon alone."

He banged his chopsticks against wine cup to keep the beat. Over and over again, he just kept on singing those 2 lines over and over again.

Lu XiaoFeng sings one line, Hua ManLou would drink one cup. Finally, he couldn't help it anymore and had to speak up: "It's not that I don't like your singing, but could you possibly sing something different?"

"No." Lu XiaoFeng replied.

"Why not?"

"Because those are the only lines I know."

Hua ManLou laughed. "You know, everyone else keep on saying that Lu XiaoFeng is a genius, one of the smartest and most intelligent men in the world; and that no matter what kind of kungfu, he would learn and master it in an instant." He observed. "But when it comes to singing, you are truly worse than a donkey."

"If you don't like my singing, then how come you don't just start singing, huh?" Lu XiaoFeng rebutted.

His whole point was to get Hua ManLou to laugh, to get Hua ManLou

to sing. Because he had never seen Hua ManLou acting like this, and drinking like that.

It wasn't good wine. Where do you go find good wine in a poor village on the mountainside at a time like this?

But no matter what kind of wine it was, it had to be better than having no wine at all. Hua ManLou suddenly lifted his cup up in the air, downed its entire contents in one dramatic flair, and began to sing.

What he sang was "Long Reminiscent," originally written by, Li Yu, the only emperor of the Southern Tang Dynasty as he was longing for his deceased wife Da ZhouHuo. So it had a sad, soft, romantic, and lonely feel to it.

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly realized that Hua ManLou had really fallen in love with that mysterious and beautiful girl. He never said anything about it, but that was only because he was deeply in love. He was deeply in love, but that was only because he had never loved before.

But what about ShangGuan FeiYan?

Her movements were too mysterious, and her actions too inexplicable, that even Lu XiaoFeng couldn't figure out what was going on inside her heart; not to mention the entangled Hua ManLou.

Suddenly, Lu XiaoFeng bursted out laughing. "My singing may be bad, but yours is even worse!" He said. "When I sing, I at least got you to laugh. But when you sing, I couldn't crack a smile even if I wanted to."

"That's why I think it's best if we just stick to drinking. 'Today has wine, already drunk of today'."

The 2 of them held up their cups. Just as the cups were about to touch, a voice said: "Is anyone here young master Lu XiaoFeng?"

The night had grown old and everyone else had already gone. There shouldn't be anyone coming to this mountainside village, and definitely not anyone coming looking for Lu XiaoFeng.

But a person did come, and he did come looking for Lu XiaoFeng.

From his looks, he was probably a hunter. He had a bamboo basket in his hand. Inside the basket was a couple of roasted chickens.

"Why are you looking for Lu XiaoFeng?" Lu XiaoFeng had to ask before answering his question.

The hunter placed the bamboo basket on the table. "This is bought for young master Lu XiaoFeng by his dear aunt who instructed me to come here and deliver it to him to go with his wine." He explained.

"My aunt?" Lu XiaoFeng uttered after being taken aback for a moment.

"You are young master Lu XiaoFeng?" The hunter seemed rather taken aback as well.

Lu XiaoFeng nodded. "But I'm not a young master, and I don't have an aunt."

"Yes you do, without a doubt you do."

"Why?"

"If that person wasn't your aunt, then why would she spent 5 taels of silver to buy these chickens and 5 more taels to make me deliver it here?" The hunter argued. "But it's just that... that...."

"It's just what?" Lu XiaoFeng asked.

"She told me that young master Lu XiaoFeng would have 4 eyebrows and that I would recognize him as soon as I saw him." The hunter answered while trying hard to fight off the urge to laugh. "But you seem to only have 2."

Lu XiaoFeng tried to keep a straight face, but failed miserably and laughed. "Have you ever seen anyone with 4 eyebrows?"

At this point the hunter began to laugh as well. "Precisely because I have never seen it before, that was the reason why I came." He replied. "I didn't come here just for those 5 taels of silver you know."

"What kind of person is my aunt?" Lu XiaoFeng asked.

"She's a little girl."

"A little girl?!" Lu XiaoFeng almost shouted. "Can a person as old as me have a little girl for an aunt?"

A forced smile appeared on the hunter's face. "At first, I didn't believe her either. But then she said that even though she wasn't very old, she has a lot of seniority. She even said that she has a grand-nephew called Hua ManLou who is more than 50 years old."

Lu XiaoFeng looked over at Hua ManLou. He wanted to laugh, but was too embarrassed to laugh.

But instead, Hua ManLou laughed: "That's right, I do have a great-aunt like that."

Once again, the hunter was taken aback by the response: "You are Hua ManLou? You are 50 years old?"

"I took good care of myself, that's why I look so young."

"How did you do it?" The hunter couldn't help but ask. "Can I do it?"

"Of course, it's quite easy really." Hua ManLou casually replied. "What I did was everyday, I would eat 50 earthworms, 20 geckos, and 2 kilograms of human."

The hunter stared at him so hard that it looked like his eyeballs were about to pop out of their sockets. Suddenly, and without saying a word,

he turned around and began to run, running like there was no tomorrow.

Lu XiaoFeng couldn't hold it any longer and began to laugh very loudly.

Hua ManLou laughed as well. "You are right," he said, "looks like when that little devil lies, she could even trick a dead person to come alive again."

As he spoke, he half-heartedly pointed at the window to the left with his chopstick.

Lu XiaoFeng took off, somersaulted in mid-air, and pushed open that window.

A girl with 2 pigtails was hiding outside of the window silently laughing to herself.

ShangGuan Xue-Er's eyes were still that big and she still seemed so good and honest. But she couldn't laugh anymore.

Grabbing her by her pigtails, Lu XiaoFeng dragged her into the room. "This little devil here, just being my aunt isn't good enough, she had to go and become your great-aunt." He observed.

Xue-Er pouted her lips a little and rebuked: "I was only playing around you know. Just because you can't stand being made fun of doesn't mean you should take it out on other people's pigtails."

"Not to mention she did spend 10 taels of silver on you." Hua ManLou smiled. "Besides, these chickens aren't bad. Even if you aren't grateful, you should at least be somewhat polite."

"Seems like only my grand-nephew still got a heart." Xue-Er casually added. "At least he is being fair and honest."

Lu XiaoFeng burst out laughing: "So according to you the person with a heart is even lower than the person without a heart?"

While he was laughing, he let Xue-Er's pigtails go. Just like a little fox, Xue-Er immediately scrambled through between his legs and ran.

Unfortunately, she wasn't fast enough as Lu XiaoFeng grabbed her by her pigtails again and dragged her back like a little chicken. Forcing her to sit down on a chair, his face turned serious as he began: "I have to ask you a question, and it's best for you if you just answer me honestly, don't even think about lying."

"I have never told a single lie before." Xue-Er blinked, looking as if she had just been grievously wronged.

"That sentence right there is a lie."

"If everything I say is an lie, then why do bother talking to me at all?" Getting mad, ShangGuan Xue-Er shouted back at him.

Knowing that it would be very stupid to get into an argument with her, Lu XiaoFeng straightened up and asked: "Why are you following us all

this time?"

"I'm not following you guys to begin with. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't keep up."

That sentence was actually true.

"Then how did you find us?"

"I knew you were going to come here for XiMen ChuiXue, so I just came straight here before you guys!"

"You have been waiting here all this time?"

"I have waited for an entire day now. Didn't even get to change my cloth or take a bath to clean myself. I stink. Don't believe me? Then come over here."

Hua ManLou was laughing again. All Lu XiaoFeng could do was clear his throat a couple of times. "Why are you waiting for us?" Lu XiaoFeng asked.

"Because I have a secret that I have to tell you."

"What secret?"

Xue-Er pouted her lips again, looking like she was about to cry again.

She suddenly produced a very delicately made golden swallow from inside her shirt. "I found this in the garden that night?"

Lu XiaoFeng took a good look at it but couldn't make anything out of it.

"Before I was born, my dad gave it to my older sister." Xue-Er continued. "My sister treasured it, she had it placed on a gold chain necklace and wore it all the time. I tried to get her to let me wear it for a day or 2, but she would never even let me touch it. But now I find it just laying there on the ground."

"Maybe she accidentally dropped it." Lu XiaoFeng suggested.

Xue-Er shook her head feverishly: "Never, not possible. This had to have been dropped by someone while they were trying to hide her body."

There were tears in her eyes, she looked very distressed, even her voice began to crack.

"Do you really think that your sister is dead?"

Xue-Er bite her lip and nodded with conviction. "Not only do I know that she's dead," she said in a raspy voice. "I know who killed her."

"Who?"

"That b1tch cousin of mine." Xue-Er bitterly replied.

"ShangGuan DanFeng?"

"Yes, her! Not only did she kill my sister, she also killed Xiao QiuYu, DuGu Fang, and Liu YuHen!"

"All 3 of them were killed by her?"

Xue-Er nodded. "I saw it with my own eyes. She was in this hotel room with Liu YuHen just talking. Then suddenly she let loose her Flying Pheonix Needles and killed Liu YuHen. She even hid him under the bed."

"To think, he wanted to die so bad, and yet he died just like that." Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"Flying Pheonix Needles are her best weapon. They clog up as soon as it meets blood and the poison is fatal. My sister was probably killed by them as well. But where did she hid my sister's body?" Tears rolled down her cheeks as she continued.

"What you said is completely logical and very sensible, as if it was all true." Lu XiaoFeng sighed again. "Too bad I still don't believe it one bit."

This time Xue-Er didn't even get mad, she just kept on crying. "I knew you wouldn't believe me, you... you... you are completely messed up over her."

Lu XiaoFeng stared at her, his conviction were beginning to shake a little. So he couldn't help but ask: "She's also your older sister's cousin, why would she kill your sister?"

"Who knows why?" Grinding her teeth, Xue-Er replied. "Maybe because she had always hated my sister for being smarter and prettier."

"Then what about Liu YuHen? Hasn't he been completely loyal towards her? Why would she kill Liu YuHen?"

"She is more vile than the vilest of snakes, if she could find it in herself to kill a person like my older sister." Xue-Er bitterly replied. "Then is there a person that she can't kill?"

Lu XiaoFeng sighed: "I know you hate her, but...."

"You think I hate her because I'm jealous of you and her?" ShangGuan Xue-Er suddenly interrupted him with a cold snicker. "She might seem very nice to me, but she's been bullying me around from behind ever since we were little.

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly interrupted her: "She's only 19, but you are 20. How could she have bully you around?"

Xue-Er couldn't answer.

Lu XiaoFeng didn't have the heart, so he added in a gentle voice: "If you are really worried about your older sister, you can rest easy at least for now. Because I know for a fact that she hasn't died."

Xue-Er bit her lips and replied: "But I really did saw it with my own eyes

from outside when she killed Liu YuHen. I...."

She suddenly stopped, her entire body froze.

The Liu YuHen that had been killed and shoved under the bed by ShangGuan DanFeng had suddenly appeared.

The night fog was bleak and desolate, the moon was hazy and dim. Liu YuHen was just walking out from underneath this hazy and dim moonlight and into this little wine shop.

His ghastly face was even more indescribably horrific when seen under this moonlight.

But his expression was very peaceful and his voice very soft. "You have had enough fun out here? Go back with me." He said, looking at Xue-Er. "His Majesty is waiting for me to take you back."

Xue-Er's eyes were almost popping out. "You... you are not dead?" She stuttered.

A look of sadness shot through Liu YuHen's eyes as he answered heavily: "Sometimes, dying isn't an easy thing."

"And my older cousin?"

"She's hoping that you would go back as soon as possible as well. You are young, wait until you get a little older, then it's still not too late to

come out and have some fun. Take your older sister for example, she goes where she wants to when she wants to, and nobody has a problem with that."

Xue-Er looked at him, as if she was frightened. Suddenly, she grabbed Lu XiaoFeng. "Please don't let him take me back!" She screamed. "Please let me follow you around, I'll be good!"

"That will have to wait until you grow up a bit too." Liu YuHen said. "You are still a kid. There are some serious things that adults have to do, how can you just tag along?"

Outside, a horse neighed. A horse carriage was outside, the very same one that Lu XiaoFeng and rode on.

"Just take a nap in the carriage." Liu YuHen continued. "Then you'll be home before you know it."

ShangGuan Xue-Er finally left, left without even turning around to look back.

Looking at her getting on her carriage, seeing how pitiful she looked, Lu XiaoFeng couldn't help but sigh again. "You are such a cute and lovable girl, why do you lie so much?"

Hua ManLou had been quietly sitting there all this time, but now he suddenly spoke up: "Everyone who lies have a reason for it. Some people lie to trick others, some people lie to tirck themselves."

He sighed and continued: "And the most vulnerable ones are those would lie only to get affections from others, to get others to notice her."

"Is it because she's never had much affection and love from others?"

"Yes."

"You are right." With a forced smile on his face, Lu XiaoFeng sighed. "Some people should people should be forgiven even though they have done bad things. Maybe I should have started to think for them much earlier th...."

He wasn't quite finished when he noticed that Liu YuHen had suddenly reappeared at the door. "Xue-Er has a message she would like for me to give you." He said slowly.

Lu XiaoFeng waited for the message. He suddenly noticed that in this man's horrifying eyes there appeared what seemed to be a hint of a warm smile. "She said that she forgot to tell you, that when you shave your mustache, you look much younger and much more handsome than when you had your mustache."

Lu XiaoFeng felt the stubbles just below his nose with the tip of his fingers. He had been feeling them with his finger the entire trip from YanBei to ShanXi. It was as if the mustache just couldn't grow fast enough for him.

"You know that I have never been saddened by the fact that I can't see." Hua ManLou was smiling from ear to ear. "But at this moment I really wish I could see how you look without that mustache."

"Very young and very handsome."

"Then how come you kept the mustache all this time?"

"Because I'm afraid that every girl would die from being too enthralled by me."

"You seemed to have quite a temper these last couple of days." Hua ManLou was still smiling. "Are you mad at yourself?"

"Why would I be mad at myself?" Lu XiaoFeng coldly replied.

"Because you feel that you have wronged that vulnerable, lovable, and lying little girl. And you are worried that she might be bullied and mistreated once she gets back."

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly stood up. But before he could leave, someone came with an invitation.

"Respectfully prepared food and spirits, for guest to wash off the dust of travel, would be honored with presence."

The invitation was signed: "Huo TianQing."

Simple sentences, written very neatly and straight. And the ink was very thick, so that every letter jutted out ever so slightly. Even those who couldn't see could use his fingers to read the invitation.

"Looks like this Warden Huo is a very thorough and attentive person." Hua ManLou observed with a smile.

"Not just attentive." Lu XiaoFeng casually.

The person who delivered the invitation was a very clever looking kid. He stood outside of the door and bowed respectfully. "Warden Huo instructed that if the honored guests would be willing to attend the little banquet. Then I, humbly, would have to get a carriage ready and wait here, so as to take the guests to Diamond Pavillion. Warden Huo is already waiting there for sirs to grace us with their presence."

"How did he know that I'm here?" Lu XiaoFeng asked.

The kid laughed a little and replied: "No matter big or small, there's not much that goes on within 400 kilometer of here that Warden Huo doesn't know about."

Chapter 6 - Swords Unsheathed and People Dead

The feast was placed inside a pavilion in the middle of the water. The surroundings seemed to have been dyed a deep shade of green because of the lotus that grew in the pond, but the railings of the pavilion were painted bright red.

The pearl-guazed curtains were raised. The wind carried with it the faint and pure fragrance of newly bloomed lotus.

It was already April.

Hua ManLou was slowly and quietly taking this kind of special pointless extravagance that only the richest of the rich had. Of course, he didn't see what Huo TianQing looked like, but he had already found out what kind of person he was by listening to his voice.

Huo TianQing's voice was low but forceful with a gentle slowness and warmth. When he talked, not only did he wanted everyone to listen to him, but he wanted them to hear him clearly.

That meant that he was a very confident and decisive man, whatever he did he would always have his own reasons. Even though he's a very arrogant, he worried about other people thinking he was arrogant.

Hua ManLou didn't dislike this person, just like how Huo TianQing didn't

dislike him as well.

There were 2 other guests as well. One was Yan family's live in guest Su ShaoYing, the other was the Head Escort of the Allied Escort, "Dragon Among the Clouds" Ma XingKong.

Ma XingKong had been famous in the martial world quite some time ago. Not only was his kungfu very good, he wasn't the type of person who would seek fame and acclaim either. So Hua ManLou couldn't help but be puzzled when he felt an indescribable hint of brown nosing in his voice whenever he talked to Huo TianQing.

Someone like him, a person who made a name for himself through his own accomplishment, should not be acting like this.

On the other hand, Su ShaoYing was very relaxed and smooth, there was no fakeness in his voice. Huo TianQing took special care to introduce him as a person of great knowledge, but from his voice, he sounded very young.

Between host and guests, there were only 5 of them. This was Hua ManLou's favorite style of hosting guests, it shows that not only is the host meticulous but also very understanding of his guests.

However, neither wine nor food had been served up yet. Even though Hua ManLou wasn't getting impatient, he had to feel a bit awkward.

There weren't many lanterns in the pavilion, but it was bright as day. That was because in the middle of the walls were hang 4 bright pearls, which

reflected the light of the few lanterns that shone onto it with a very soft glow, making the lighting in the room unspeakably pleasing to the eye.

Su ShaoYing was making small talk about the raunchy actions of the Later Emperor of Southern Tang: "When he was with Consort Little Zhuo, he would never light lanterns. For it was written in books that when Queen Jiang JuoLi would see light in the night, she would close her eyes and say: 'Smoke, means candles are burning, when one's eyes are closed, the smell of smoke is even more evident.' She knew what he was doing whenever she smelled smoke. Someone asked her once how she was so sure that it wasn't the smoke from one of the candles of her own place in the palace. She replied: 'This pavilion hangs a huge pearl up onto the ceiling at night, which would light the room as bright as midday.'"

"The Emperor's lust was a little too overboard," Huo TianQing commented with a smile. "That's why it was a mere matter of time before the Southern Tang collapsed."

"But he was merely a affectionate man, his utter compassion was absolutely unmatched," Su ShaoYing replied.

"Compassionate and affectionate men just aren't fit to be Emperors," Huo TianQing casually replied.

"But if he had a person like Master Huo as Chancellor, maybe Southern Tang wouldn't have been destroyed," Ma XingKong added with a smile.

"If only Li Ying was born a couple hundred years later," Lu XiaoFeng suddenly sighed, "or else if he was here he would undoubtedly be even more anxious than I am for the wine to get here."

Hua ManLou laughed.

Huo TianQing couldn't help but laugh as well: "The wine and food had all been ready, it's just that when the Big Boss heard that Lu XiaoFeng and Hua ManLou were the guests today, he had to come and join in on the fun."

"We are waiting for him?" Lu XiaoFeng asked.

"If you are feeling a bit impatient, we could order some small eats to get ready for the wine?" Huo TiaQing offered.

"Waiting a little longer won't be a big deal. It's so rare for Big Boss to be in such a merry mood, we shouldn't do anything to bring him down," Ma XingKong immediately replied.

"Ay don't want to brin' ya guys down either! Quick, brin' some wine!" A voice suddenly came from outside the pavilion.

A person walked in laughing, his laugh was sharp and delicate.... His face was white and chubby with skin soft like a young maiden's. Only the huge, beak-like nose on his face looked masculine.

Hua ManLou pondered: "This man was the Warden of the Treasury for the Golden Roc Empire, could he be a eunuch?"

"How do you do boss?" Ma XingKong had already stood up and

greeted him.

But Yan TieShan didn't even look at him as he grabbed a hold of Lu XiaoFeng's hand and sized him up over and over again. He suddenly burst out in laughter: "Haha! Ya still look the same. Ya haven't changed a bit from the last time Ay met ya at on top of the Sun-Watch Peak at TaiShan. But how come ya only got 2 eye brows now?"

He spoke with a slight ShanXi accent, as if he was afraid that others might not think that he was from ShanXi.

Lu XiaoFeng's eyes flashed as he smiled: "Ay couldn't pay for the wine Ay drank, so the wife of the owner of the wine shop shaved my mustache off to make a face powderer for herself."

That sent Yan TieShan into another fit of laughter. "His Grandma's! That there woman must've loved the way yar mustache brushed against her face!" He turned around and patted Hua ManLou on his shoulder. "And you must be Hua's 7th boy! A couple of yar brothers have been here before. The 3rd and 5th boys could hold their wine quite well."

"The 7th boy could drink a bit as well," Hua ManLou said with a smile.

"Alright!" Yan TieShan clapped his hands together in anticipation. "Great! Go and get those jugs of wine underneath my bed. The one that don't get drunk tonight is his grandma's little niece!"

ShanXi eats were especially spicy, and into the dishes that were served up were added some extra pepper powders.

Using the chopsticks in his white and tender hand, Yan TieShan kept on putting food into Lu XiaoFeng's bowl nonstop. "This here is us ShanXi's famed dish. Although it's nothin' to shout about, ya just can't his grandma's get this anywhere else."

"So is Big Boss from ShanXi?" Lu XiaoFeng inquired.

"Ay was born and raised a commoner. All these years, Ay've been to TaiShan jus that one time, to watch his grandma's sunrise. But no matter how Ay look at it, it looks just like a huge egg yolk to me. Borin' as hell that was." Yan TieShan laughed and said.

He kept on saying "his grandma's" here and there, as if he was trying to make sure that everyone knew that he was a real man's man, a real coarse and crude man.

Lu XiaoFeng laughed as well. Smiling, he brought the cup up to his lip and suddenly asked: "I wonder where Warden Yan was from?"

"Warden Huo," Ma XingKong immediately corrected him, "not Warden Yan."

"I'm not talking about Warden Huo of Pearl and Diamond Pavilion," Lu XiaoFeng casually replied. "I'm talking about Yan LiBen, the Warden of the Treasury of the defunct Golden Roc Empire."

Unblinking, he stared at Yan TieShan's face and, one word at a time, said: "I'm sure that Big Boss must know of this man."

Yan TieShan's white, smooth, and soft face suddenly tensed up like a rubber band. Even that smile became awkwardly stiff.

He was a man who looked the same no matter what his mood may be. But what Lu XiaoFeng just said seemed act like a whip, a whip the whipped open an age old scar, a fatal wound that started to bleed again.

"If Big Boss know this man," Lu XiaoFeng's eyes shone as he slowly continued, "then could you please inform him that, regarding that several decade old debt of his, someone is here to collect it."

"Warden Huo!" Yan TieShan suddenly shouted, his face still very tense.

"Sir?" Huo TianQing had not moved one bit.

"Mr. Hua and Mr. Lu do not wish to stay here any longer. Please prepare a horse carriage for them and see them off, they want to leave right now!" Yan TieShan coldly said.

Not waiting for a response, he flicked his sleeve at their direction and began walking towards the exit.

But before he could reach the exit, there was already someone outside blocking his way. "They don't wish to leave, and you better stay here as well," a cold voice said.

That person was standing tall and straight, everything he was wearing

was white like snow. But the sword that hung off his belt was black; ebony black, slender, and ancient.

"How dare you disrespect me so?" Yan TieShan's eyes bugged out as he demanded. "Who the hell are you?"

"XiMen ChuiXue."

XiMen ChuiXue, the name itself was like a blade, cold, heartless, and sharp.

Even Yan TieShan had to involuntarily take 2 steps back. "Guards!" He suddenly shouted.

Other than the 2 little small kids that were pouring wine and that green clothed servant who comes in once in a while to bring up the dishes, the pavilion was completely silent, not even a hint of a person could be detected.

But as soon as Big Boss Yan shouted his command, 5 people immediately flew in through the windows. Their movements were extremely fast and their weapons were glistening, a ringed sword, a feathered sabre, a whip spear, a pair of chicken talons, and two separate iron nunchuks.

All 5 were very delicately crafted unusual weapons, whoever could wield any of these types of weapons was undoubtedly a martial arts master.

But XiMen ChuiXue didn't even look at them. "Once my sword is unsheathed, it will kill." He coldly declared. "Are you really going to force me to pull out my sword."

Of the 5, two of them were already looking very green. But there are people who aren't afraid to die everywhere.

Suddenly the wind began to howl as the feathered sabre became a wall of sabres that flew towards XiMen ChuiXue.

The nunchuks turned into a fierce tornado as they came sweeping across XiMen ChuiXue's knees.

One weapon was hard and furious while the other was quick and light, but both were formidable and they worked in perfected unison. After all, the 2 of them do practice together all the time.

XiMen ChuiXue's pupils suddenly constricted, at that precise moment, his sword was unsheathed.

Huo TianQing did not move, instead he just quietly stared at Lu XiaoFeng. If Lu XiaoFeng didn't move, then he would not move either.

But Ma XingKong had already stood up. "Warden Huo invited you people here as guests, how dare you cause trouble here?" He shouted viciously.

As he was shouting, his hand went down to his waist and came back up with a fish scaled golden coiled dragon cane. With a flick, it was stuck

straight out as it shot toward Hua ManLou's throat.

He knew that Hua ManLou was blind and figured that it was easier to bully a blind person.

Nevertheless, this coiled dragon cane of his was very different. After the cane was thrust out, the coiled dragon that was carved onto the stick's mouth suddenly snapped open and, with a audible "deng", a thin but sharp blade sprung out from inside.

Hua ManLou sat there, peacefully waiting. Suddenly, he lifted up his hand and caught the sword between his index finger and middle finger. Another "deng"! The refined iron sword that a blacksmith spent months crafting snapped in 3.

Ma XingKong's face changed colors as he immediately flicked his wrist, making the coiled dragon cane whirling around in an attempt to attack both of Hua ManLou's ears.

Hua ManLou sighed as he twirled his sleeves like a storm cloud as it wrapped around the cane. He then gently pulled.

Ma XingKong fell on top of the table, smashing it, causing the plates on there to fly off wildly. Hua ManLou gave a light push and sent him flying straight through the window and into lotus pond that surrounded the pavilion.

"Excellent display!" Su ShaoYing involuntarily uttered.

"It's not that I'm good, it's he's not that good." Hua ManLou casually replied. "Compare to the way his martial arts was, he has at most 50 percent of his skills and strength left. Did he suffer some severe internal injury?"

"Excellent analysis. Three years ago he was on the receiving end of one of Warden Huo's air splitting palms." Su ShaoYing replied.

"No wonder," Hua ManLou sighed.

He finally understood why Ma XingKong acted like such a shameless brown noser. If a person like him, who made a living from fighting, lost most of his kungfu skills, then he must find someone for protection. And it didn't get much better than having Pearl and Diamond Pavilion as protection.

Su ShaoYing suddenly spoke up: "Excuse me, but I wish to try out Mr. Hua's amazing skills. En garde!"

As he finished his sentence, he suddenly slashed out with the chopstick he had in his hand.

This cultured and refined young gentry was actually able to use the chopstick as sword and perform orthodoxed sword styles. In a blink of an eye, he had already made 7 moves at Hua ManLou.

Lu XiaoFeng did not move, instead he just quietly stared at Huo TiaQing. If Huo TianQing didn't move, then he would not move either.

There were already three people on the floor who would never move again. The feathered sabre were stuck on the window-sill, the nunchuks had already flown out of the window, and the whip spear had been snapped into 4 pieces.

When the sword was first drawn, there was still blood on the tip of the sword.

XiMen ChuiXue gently blew onto his sword, making the red blood drip off the tip one drop at a time.

{ChuiXue sounds exactly the same as blowing blood in Chinese}

Even though his face was still expressionless, those stone cold eyes of his were flashing as they coldly stared at Yan TieShan.

"You should be fighting yourself," he said, coldly. "Why did you have to send others to their death?"

"Because I have bought their lives a long time ago!" Yan TieShan replied with a condescending snicker.

He made a gesture with his hand and 6 more people appeared inside the pavilion. His eyes were moving, as if he was searching for a escape route.

He wasn't speaking with a ShanXi accent anymore, nor was he cursing left and right about somebody's grandmother anymore. But his voice had become sharp and piercing, every word out of his mouth were like

needles, needles that stabbed at other people's ear drums.

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly laughed: "So it turns out that Big Boss is a master possessing of tremendous internal strength."

"His kungfu is probably better than everyone here." Huo TianQing casually replied.

"It's a shame that it doesn't matter how great of a martial master he is."

"Why not?"

"Because he has a fatal weakness."

"Which is?"

"He's afraid to die!"

Su ShaoYing had just moved on into the second set of 7 interconnected sword moves. The moves were fast, dynamic, and ingenious, never leaving the vicinity of Hua ManLou's face.

Hua ManLou was still sitting there, with a chopstick in his hand as well. With only a simple flick or twirl, he would, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, casually counter every one of Su ShaoYing's pressing moves.

After the second set of 7 sword moves, Su ShaoYing suddenly stopped. He suddenly discovered that it was as if this ever smiling blind man knew more about his own sword style than himself.

Every time he made a move, it was almost as if his opponent knew that this move was coming a long time ago. "Are you, sir, a disciple of E'Mei as well?" He had to ask.

Hua ManLou gently shook his head and smiled. "To you guys, every sword style of every sect in the world use different moves and strategies. But to a blind man, all the moves in the world are the same."

This is the most profound principle in martial arts. Su ShaoYing sort of understood, but yet did not at the same time. He wanted to probe further, but couldn't figure out how or what to ask.

"Are you, sir, one of the 7 Swords of E'Mei?" It was Hua ManLou who asked the next question.

Su ShaoYin hesitated before finally answering: "I am the Second Su among the 7 Swords."

"So he's a student of the sword as well?" XiMen ChuiXue suddenly, and coldly, interrupted. "Why aren't you challenging me?"

Su ShaoYing's face went pale. "Crack"! The chopstick in his hand was snapped in two.

"It's been said that E'Mei's sword skills are the best in all the land,"

XiMen ChuiXue snickered, "can it be that it is actually not worthy of such a lofty of a status?"

Gritting his teeth, Su ShaoYing suddenly snapped around, just in time to see the last drop of blood drip off the tip of XiMen ChuiXue's sword.

Lu XiaoFeng and Huo TianQing were still quietly sitting there, staring at each other, as if they were waiting for the other to make the first move.

But there were 7 men on the ground who would never move again. Of the 7, every one of them was a first rate martial arts master. But all of them were instantly stabbed through the throat by XiMen ChuiXue's sword.

Yan TieShan's eyes began to twitch. Only now could one tell that age had taken its toll on him.

But he felt no sadness or sympathy for these people who died for him.

He was still here only because the perfect opportunity has yet to present itself and he still didn't have to get out of here.

The 4 men who could still move had lost their courage to make another move. Seeing Su ShaoYing making his way over, they immediately got out of his way.

Su ShaoYing's steps were steady, but his face was without the slightest hint of color.

"What sword do you use?" coldly, XiMen ChuiXue asked, coldly staring at him.

"As long as it kills, I can use it," Su ShaoYing snickered back and replied.

"Good, there are swords on the ground, pick on."

There were 2 swords on the ground, lying in the puddles of blood.

One sword was skinny and long while the other was thick and heavy. Su ShaoYing paused for a moment before flicking a sword into the air with the tip of his shoes. The sword landed perfectly into his hand.

E'Mei Sect's sword skills are famous for their quickness and flexibility, but instead he picked the heavier sword. This young man actually was planning on using his own strength of youth along with aggressive and fierce moves to counter XiMen ChuiXue's lightning fast and equally deadly way of fighting.

This choice should have been the correct one. DuGu YiHe's disciples all possessed superb judgement skills.

But this time he was wrong, he should not have picked any sword at all.

XiMen ChuiXue gazed at him. "Twenty years from now, your sword skills would amount to something," said XiMen ChuiXue.

"Oh?" Su ShaoYing replied.

"So I don't want to kill you right now. Twenty years from now, come and find me."

"Twenty years is too long of a wait!" Su ShaoYing suddenly shouted. "I can't wait that long!"

He was still a hot-blooded young man. Feeling a rush of blood to his face, he continuously attacked with the sword in his hand. The sword moves carried with it hints of the intense big slashing movements of sabre skills.

This was DuGu YiHe's creation, Sabre-Sword Twin Kill, consisting of 49 moves and stances. When he joined E'Mei Sect, he had already possessed astounding skills in sabres due to 30 years or so of hard work. He was able to inject the fierceness and intensity of sabre skills into the famous agile and dynamic sword skill of E'Mei Sect.

These 49 moves that he created could be used with a sabre or a sword. There was nothing like it anywhere else in the world.

Even Lu XiaoFeng had not seen this skill before.

XiMen ChuiXue's eyes lit up even more. To him, seeing a new and different skill for the first time was like a kid finding a new and different toy, there was an indescribable joy and wonderment.

He waited until Su ShaoYing had made 21 moves before he finally

made a move.

Because he had already discovered the weak point of the skill, it might have been only a little bit of a weakness, but a little bit of weakness was enough.

His sword flashed. With just one move, his sword penetrated Su ShaoYing's throat.

The sword tip still carried blood. XiMen ChuiXue gently blew the blood off of the tip of his sword.

He gazed at the blade, his eyes suddenly filled with loneliness and solitude. He suddenly sighed: "Why must all of the best of the young men like you seek death like so? In twenty years, where would you have me go to find a worthy opponent?"

If those words had come from anyone else, it would have undoubtedly seem a bit nauseating. But when the words came from him, it carried with an unspeakable sadness and loneliness.

"If that's the case, then why did you kill him?" Hua ManLou suddenly asked.

"Because the only type of sword moves I know is the killing kind," XiMen ChuiXue answered with a heavy face.

Hua ManLou sighed, for he knew that this man was telling the truth. Every move this man makes was final and for the kill, no compromises, no

room for retreat.

"Either you die, or I die!" Every time his sword is thrust out, there was never any choice left for his opponent, there wasn't even any choice left for himself.

A breeze blew in from outside of the pavilion, carrying with it the refreshing fragrance of the lotus, but it could not cover the stinking smell of blood.

XiMen ChuiXue suddenly turned toward Yan TieShan. "If you don't leave I won't attack, if you move, you die!" He coldly declared.

"Why must I leave?" Yan TieShan actually smiled. "I don't know why you guys are doing this."

"You should," sighed Lu XiaoFeng.

"But I don't."

"How about Yan LiBen? Does he know?"

Yan TieShan's eyes began to twitch again. On his white and chubby face there suddenly appeared a strange look of horror. He looked as if he suddenly aged tremendously. Only after a long time did he finally let out a sigh and mumble: "Yan LiBen died a long time ago, why are you guys still looking for him?"

"It's not us who wants to find him," Lu XiaoFeng answered.

"Then who?"

"The Golden Roc Emperor."

Upon hearing the name, Yan TieShan's already strange looking face suddenly became even more horrifying. His body suddenly began to spin like a spin-top as the inside of the pavilion suddenly lit up with a flash.

Along with the flash, scores of silk strand needles suddenly shot out like water droplets during a thunderstorm, shooting towards XiMen ChuiXue, Hua ManLou, and Lu XiaoFeng.

At that moment, an aura of sword shot through the flash of light.

The aura was freezing cold and sounded like wind blowing through a bamboo woods. The aura and the flash suddenly all disappeared, in their place was scores of pearls that were falling out of the sky, every pearl had been cut in half.

Such fast of a sword. But Yan TieShan was gone.

Lu XiaoFeng was gone as well.

On top of the lotus pond outside, in the distance, there seemed to be the shape of a person whose toe gently landed on top of a lotus leaf before taking off again.

There were 2 of them, but the two of them seemed to be stuck together with the trailing person practically being the leading person's shadow.

The shape flickered and suddenly disappeared. But the sounds of clothing flopping in the wind could be heard from inside the pavilion.

Then Yan TieShan suddenly reappeared.

Lu XiaoFeng reappeared as well, still sitting in his old chair, as if he had never left.

Yan TieShan was also standing where he just was, but he was leaning up against the wall, trying to catch his breath. In the last few moments, he seemed to have aged alot again.

When he first walked into the pavilion, he was a spirited middle-aged man. His face was clean and smooth, without a hint of a beard. But now, anyone could tell that he was an 80 year old man.

His face slooped down and his eyes were several shades darker. Catching his breath, he conceded: "I'm getting... getting old."

Lu XiaoFeng gazed at him and couldn't help but sigh as well.

"You really are getting old."

"Why must you do this to an old man?"

"Because this old man owed somebody something, no matter how old he is, he has to repay it."

"I repay every debt I owed, but since when did I owe anybody anything?"

"Maybe you didn't but what about Yan LiBen?"

Yan TieShan's face twitched again as he savagely shouted: "That's right! I am Yan LiBen! That man eating Warden Yan. But ever since I got here, I...."

He suddenly stopped, that twitching face of his suddenly and miraculously became peaceful.

Then everyone saw a rush of blood gushing out of his chest, just like a vibrant flower suddenly blooming.

After the initial explosion of blood, the flow was dwindled, only then did the sword stuck in his chest become visible.

He looked down and saw the glistening tip of the sword, he looked surprised and bewildered.

But he still hadn't die yet, his chest was still moving up and down, just like an accordion.

Huo TianQing's face turned stone cold as he stood up and demanded: "Who did it? Who did it!"

"I did it!" A clear and bell like voice answered as, looking like a swallow, a person flew in through the window. Her clothing clung to her body like a black shark's skin because they were soaked with water.

Such a slender body, with water still dripping off of it. Obviously she had just came out from inside the lotus pond outside.

Yan TieShan forced his eyes open and, shocked to see her, summoned up all the strength in his body to say 3 words.

"Who are you?"

She took off the towel covering head, letting a head of soft, jet black hair drape down on her shoulders.

It made her face more pale, more beautiful.

But her eyes, the very ones that were staring at Yan TieShan, were filled with hatred.

"I am Princess DanFeng of the Golden Roc Empire. I am the one that want to find you to repay that old debt," she replied viciously.

Yan TieShan looked at her in shock. Suddenly, his eyes bulged out and his body snapped straight, never to move again. In that pair of bulged

out eyes, there was a strange yet indiscernable expression. Was it shock? Was it rage? Or was it terror?

He didn't fall down, because the sword was still in his chest.

The sword was cold, the blood was cold as well.

Princess DanFeng finally, slowly, turned around. The rage and hatred on her face had turned to sadness.

She was just about to address Lu XiaoFeng when XiMen ChuiXue suddenly spoke up: "You use sword too?"

Princess DanFeng was taken aback for a moment before finally nodding.

"From this day forth, if you ever use sword again, I will kill you!"

Obviously shocked, Princess DanFeng instinctively asked: "Why?"

"Swords aren't used to kill from behind. If you kill from behind, then you are not worthy of wielding a sword."

He suddenly threw his hand up. "Bang"! The tip of his sword hit the tip of the sword in Yan TieShan's chest.

Yan TieShan's body fell down to the floor, and the sword in his chest was

knocked into the lotus pond.

XiMen ChuiXue was already outside of the pavilion. Lifting that still blood-stained sword up to his face, he casually shook his hand. The sword suddenly broke into 6 pieces and fell onto the ground.

Another breeze blew by, the night fog began to appear on the lotus pond, and he had suddenly disappeared within the fog.

Huo TianQing sat back down, not moving a muscle. His face was like a stone-colored mask.

But Lu XiaoFeng knew all too well that no expression is often saddest expression of all.

"Yan TieShan is a traitor of the Golden Roc Empire, so this matter wasn't just a personal matter. It's not something that outsiders should meddle with," Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"I know," nodded Huo TianQing.

"So you shouldn't blame yourself."

Huo TianQing was quiet for a long time. Suddenly, he looked up: "But it was I who invited you here."

"Yes."

"If you had not come, at least Yan TieShan wouldn't be dead at this moment."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm not saying anything," Huo TianQing coldly replied. "Just that I want to see the lightness kungfu of the Twin Pheonix Winged Lu XiaoFeng and that legendary "Idea in Heart" skill of yours."

"Must you fight with me?" Lu XiaoFeng forced a smile.

"Yes."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed. Princess DanFeng suddenly charged up to him and shouted: "Why do you fight him? You should fighting me!"

"You?"

"I'm the one who killed Yan TieShan, killed him from behind. Why don't you try and see if killing people from behind is the only thing I know!" She sneered at him.

She had just been scolded by XiMen ChuiXue, and all that pent up frustration had to be released somewhere, and that somewhere was Huo TianQing.

Huo TianQing looked at her and softly replied: "Whatever Yan TieShan owes you, I'll pay for it. You can leave now."

"Are you not brave enough to fight me?"

"It's not that I don't dare to, it's that I don't care to."

"Why?"

"Because you have no chance against me," Huo TianQing casually replied.

Princess DanFeng's face was flushed crimson with fury as she suddenly thrust out 2 of her soft and delicate fingers and actually tried to poke Huo TianQing's eyes out.

Even though her fingers were soft like new sprouts, her move was extremely malicious and evil, not to mention fast as well.

Huo TianQing's shoulders didn't move, neither did his arms, but his body suddenly move back 20 meters. Picking up Yan TieShan's body, he declared: "Lu XiaoFeng, I'll be waiting for you at sunrise at Green Wind Outlook."

Before he even finished his sentence, he was already outside of the pavilion.

Princess DanFeng bit her lips and stumped her foot. She was so mad that she was about cry.

But Lu XiaoFeng suddenly broke out into a smile: "If you had used your Flying Pheonix Needles, maybe he wouldn't have gotten away."

"Flying Pheonix Needles? What are you talking about?" Princess DanFeng was confused.

"Your own secret projectile weapon, Flying Pheonix Needles."

Princess DanFeng stared at him for a long time before letting out a snicker: "Turns out that not only can I kill people from behind, I could kill with projectiles as well."

"Projectiles are still weapons. There's alot of good people in the martial world who uses that kind of weapon."

"But I have never used them before, I have never even heard those words, 'Flying Pheonix Needles,' before."

This reply didn't seem to surprise Lu XiaoFeng, the only reason he asked this was to make sure that the little devil was lying him again.

But Princess DanFeng was so upset that her rims of her eyes were red. "I know that you are mad at me, that's why you made up all that stuff to mess with me," she said, biting her lips.

"Why would I be mad at you?"

"Because you believe that I shouldn't have come, and really shouldn't

have killed Yan TieShan." She looked as if she was being wronged as her eyes filled with tears, she continued forcefully. "Because you would never understand how much suffering he had caused our family. If he hadn't betrayed us, we could have had the chance to revive our empire and avenge my grandfather. But now... now...."

She didn't finish, she was unable to hold her tears back anymore. Her face was covered in tears.

There was nothing that Lu XiaoFeng could have said.

Who said that tears aren't a female's most effective weapon? Especially a beautiful woman, for her tears are truly more precious than the most precious of pearls.

Chapter 7 - Master and Sect

Waxing moonlight. Dawn's still more than 6 hours away.

Lu XiaoFeng had already return to the inn he was staying at and ordered a table of fine wine and food.

"No matter what," he laughed, "I can at least still eat and drink all I want one more time."

"You should get some sleep." Hua ManLou adviced.

"If you were going to duel with someone like Huo TianQing at sunrise, could you sleep?"

"No, I couldn't."

"You know what's the best thing about you?" Lu XiaoFeng laughed. "You never ever lie. Shame that sometimes you sound like such a liar when you tell the truth."

"I wouldn't be able to sleep, but only because I wouldn't understand him at all!"

"He really is quite an enigmatic man."

"How long have you known him?"

"About 4 years. Four years ago when Yan TieShan went to TaiShan to watch the sunrise, he went along as well. Athief and I just happened to set that date and place to meet up at the top of TaiShan to see who could do more somersaults."

"How well do you know him?"

"Not much."

"You said that despite his young age, he has great seniority!"

"Have you ever heard of Heaven Pine, Cloud Crane, the Two Elders of ShangShan?"

"The Two Elders of ShangShan has long been considered the North Star of the martial world. Even if I was deaf, I would have heard of his name."

"Well, I heard that he is their little martial brother."

Hua ManLou's expression changed visibly.

"If the 2 of them were alive today, they would probably be around 70 or 80 years of age. Huo TianQing is at most not yet 30. How could there be such a huge gap in the age of martial brothers?"

"There have been husband and wives who were 40 or 50 years apart in age, much less martial brothers...."

"So that's why even a man who has been famous for 40 years like Shan XiYan could only be his martial nephew."

"That's right."

"Back then Heaven Hunter Elder was famous throughout the world, but he only took the Two Elders of ShangShan as his disciples. How did a Huo TianQing suddenly come out of nowhere?"

"The Hua family only had 6 kids," Lu XiaoFeng smiled and shot back, "so how did you suddenly come out of nowhere?"

Parents have kids, masters take in disciples, this kind of thing just isn't anybody else's business.

But a look of concern had shown up on Hua ManLou's face.

"I have never met Shan XiYan before. But I know that his lightness kungfu and his palm technique are known as 2 of the wonders of the martial world. Don't know how well Huo TianQing compares to him."

"I have never seen Huo TianQing fight either. But seeing how he was able to pull off a skill like Swallow Thrice Stir Water while holding onto a heavy guy like Yan TieShan, I would say that there's not that many people in the world that is better than him."

"How about you?"

Lu XiaoFeng didn't answer. He never liked to answer those kinds of questions. In truth, other than himself, there probably isn't another person in the world that knows how good his kungfu really is.

But this time Hua ManLou seemed to be determined to find an answer and continued to ask.

"Are you positive that you can beat him?"

Lu XiaoFeng still did not answer. He merely poured another cup of wine and slowly drank it.

Hua ManLuo suddenly sighed. "You aren't positive. That's why you are careful not to drink too much wine."

Lu XiaoFeng usually didn't drink wine like this.

Ever since arriving here, Princess DanFeng actually turned very quiet. She had been sitting there and listening the entire time. Only now did she suddenly speak up: "You just said that you and a thief were doing somersaults at the top of TaiShan, who was the thief?"

"The King of Thieves!" Lu XiaoFeng let out a little laugh. "Stole everywhere and anywhere in the world and never found a match yet. But not only does his victims not get mad, they feel honored."

"Why?"

"Because there aren't that many people good enough for him to steal from. Besides, he never steals anything that's worth anything. He only steals because he bet against someone that he could."

Lu XiaoFeng laughed a bit at that comment and continued.

"One time, he bet someone that he could somehow steal the World's Greatest Miser, Cheng FuZhou's wife's toilet!"

Princess DanFeng couldn't help but let out a little peal of laughter at that.

"So what happened?"

"He won the bet."

"So why did you compete doing somersaults with him?"

"Because I know for a fact that I can't out steal him. And yet I really really wanted win from him those 50 jugs of wine that he had just won."

"That's right. Use your strength to attack their weakness. Why don't you do that against Huo TianQing?" Princess DanFeng observed. "You don't have to fight to the death with him."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed. "There are some people in the world that, no matter what kind of trick you try and pull on them, it won't work. XiMen ChuiXue is one of them, Huo TianQing is another."

"You think that he really wants to fight you to the death?"

"With the way Yan TieShan treated him, he has to somehow pay him back. He had decided long ago that he would gladly give his life to pay back this debt." Lu XiaoFeng's expression was dead serious.

"But you don't need to be just like him!"

Lu XiaoFeng smiled some, as if he didn't want to talk about this subject anymore. He stood up and slowly walked up to the window.

The window had been propped open from the very start. He suddenly realized that sometime ago an old man wearing a long robe had brought a stool outside and was sitting in the middle of the court yard smoking a pipe.

It was deep into the night, but the old man showed no sign of weariness. He just quietly sat there, as if he had intended to sit there until sun rise.

"The weather is turning a bit cold," Lu XiaoFeng suddenly smiled and spoke, "if you don't mind our company, then why not come in and have a couple of drinks with us and make the long night pass faster?"

But the old man did not respond one bit. It was as if he was deaf and did not even hear Lu XiaoFeng's words. All Lu XiaoFeng could do was keep smiling.

"It's not polite to refuse other people's good intentions!" Princess DanFeng, however, was less than thrilled and sneered.

She suddenly rushed to the window and, with a flick of her arm, sent the cup of wine in her hand hurling toward the old man. The flight of the cup was fast but steady, not a drop of wine inside the cup was spilled.

The old man suddenly let out a cold snicker, reached out, and caught the cup. He then poured the entire content of the cup onto the ground and actually began to eat the cup. Piece by piece, he swallowed the cup, which made all kinds of cracking sound inside his mouth.

Princess DanFeng was shocked by what she just saw.

"Is there something wrong with this old man?" She had to ask. "He does not drink wine, but eats wine cups?"

Lu XiaoFeng's eyes flickered in the moonlight.

"That may be because the wine was something I offered," he observed with a smile. "And the wine cup was not."

At this moment, a meat-bun vendor actually walked from outside into the court yard.

At this time of day, so deep into the night, does he really hope to get some business here?

"Hey, you!" Princess DanFeng blinked. "Are you selling those meat buns?"

"As long as you got money, of course!"

"How much?"

"Very cheap! Ten thousand taels of silver a piece, and not a tael less."

Princess DanFeng's face changed colors a bit. "Ok, then let me get 2 of these 10,000 taels of silver meat buns." She chortled. "Send them on over."

""Kay!"

He had just took out two meat buns when a yellow dog jumped out from a corner of the wall and came charging at him, barking loudly.

"What? Could it be possible that you want to buy some of my meat buns like that girl over there?" The vendor stared at the dog. "Don't you know that these meat buns of mine were originally made for beating dogs?"

He really actually did start beating the dog with the meat buns. The

dog immediately stopped barking and took a couple of bites out of the meat buns. Suddenly, the dog yelped and rolled on the ground, turning from a live dog to a dead dog.

Princess DanFeng's face changed complexion yet again. "There's poison inside the meat buns?!"

"Not only poison," the vendor casually smiled, "the meat itself is human meat."

"How dare you try and sale this kind of meat buns?" Princess DanFeng angrily demanded.

"I'm just doing my job," he rolled his eyes at her, "whether or not to buy it is up to you. I didn't force you to buy them."

Princess DanFeng's face almost turned yellow in anger. She could barely stop herself from rushing forth and slapping him several times.

But Lu XiaoFeng had quietly grabbed a hold of her hand. It was at this moment that they heard someone slowly sigh: "Such starlight such a night, for whom do the wind come through the open window?"

A dirty and filthy looking gentry, with his hand behind his back, had slowly wandered into the court yard.

He suddenly turned to the vendor and smiled.

"So how many did you kill today?"

"My meat buns can only kill dogs, not humans," the vendor rolled his eyes again. "Give them a try and you'll see."

He tossed a meat bun to the gentry, who actually immediately caught the bun and ate it.

"Looks like you are telling the truth," he said as he patted his stomach. "Not only that, these can cure illnesses too."

"What kind of illness?" A voice asked from outside the walls.

"Hunger!" The gentry replied.

"Oh I have got that. A very bad case of it too." The person outside replied. "Quick, give me a meat bun and cure it."

"Kay!"

The vendor took out another meat bun and tossed it up toward the top of the wall. A beggar, who had suddenly appeared on top of the wall, opened his mouth and caught the meat bun with his teeth and swallowed it. The vendor's tosses were quick, this beggar was downing the meat buns just as quick. In a blink of an eye 7 or 8 meat buns had disappeared into the beggar's belly.

"Seems like that would cure that hunger of yours at last!" The gentry

observed.

The beggar frowned.

"You guys tricked me, you can't die from poison from these meat buns, but you can die from over stuffing yourself with them!"

"Not a big deal!" Another person had shown up outside the walls. "Dying from stuffing yourself? From starvation? From anger at your wife? Don't worry, I got just the medicine."

A herb selling medicine man, carrying a medicine case and a small bell came slowly stumbling in. Turned out he was a cripple as well.

A quiet little court yard, as if some people had planned to party here, suddenly turned into a crowded and noisy mess. Soon a make-up selling merchant, a lumber jack, and a grocery seller joined as well.

Princess DanFeng's eyes were getting sore from all the staring she was doing. Even though she had never really had much real martial world experience, she had realized by now that these people were coming for them.

The strange part was that all these people were staying outside, crammed in the court yard, and did not seem the least bit interested in coming inside and troubling them.

"Do you think these people are here to avenge Yan TieShan?" She could not stop herself from quietly asking Lu XiaoFeng.

"How could Big Boss Yan have friends like these?" Lu XiaoFeng smiled and shook his head.

"They all seemed to know kungfu."

"A city has always been a place of crouching tigers and hidden dragons." Lu XiaoFeng observed. "As long as they do not bother trouble us, why go and trouble them and meddle in their business?"

"Since when did you become the kind of person that don't go meddle in other people's business?" Hua ManLou suddenly interrupted with a laugh.

Lu XiaoFeng shared in the joke. "Just now."

The night patrols's gong could be heard. Three rings, it was past midnight.

{Note: In ancient Chinese cities, there were night patrols who walked the streets beating a small gong that signaled the time. The night was divided into 5 equal sections, with the night patrol ringing the corresponding times. Hence, 3 rings signal midnight.}

The pipe-smoking old man suddenly stood up and yawned: "How come the person that invited us all here isn't here yet?"

Turned out that he was neither deaf nor mute.

Princess DanFeng was getting even more be fuddled. Who had invited these people here? And what for?

"He should be here very soon," the gentry observed.

"I'm going to go have a look see," the meat bun vendor offered.

His hand went into action again, tossing out meat buns from inside his basket. The scores of meat buns that he tossed out actually, one on top of another, landed in a stack that ended up more than 10 meters high.

With little effort, the meat bun vendor jumped on top of this stack of meat buns like a rooster at the top of a fence. He was steady as can be, not wavering the least bit in the wind.

Not only was his skill with his hands fast and precise, his lightness kungfu was top rate as well.

"Looks like walking the martial world really isn't easy at all," Princess DanFeng sighed and muttered under her breath. "Only now do I understand that."

"At least you understand now, that's always a good thing," Hua ManLou replied with a smile.

"In coming!" The vendor suddenly shouted.

That seemed to gave everyone a boost in energy. Even Princess DanFeng's heart was about to leap out of her throat. She had been find out what kind of person this person was.

But she could not help but be slightly disappointed when she saw him.

In young maidens' minds and imagination, if this person was not a suave and handsome young swordsman, he no doubt be at least an awe-inspiring and incredibly powerful hero of the martial world.

But the person that came turned out to be a bald old man with a thin and yellow complexion. He was wearing a gray and dusty rough textured piece of cloth that just barely covered his knee caps. On his feet he wore white clothed socks and gray shoes that were typical of an old farmer who had come in town to the market for the fair.

But his eyes shone. Radiant and powerful, they flickered in the moon light.

Weird thing was that everyone in the court yard was obviously waiting for him, but now that he had shown up, nobody went up to say anything to him, they only quietly made a little path for him.

This bald old man's eyes looked around for a moment before he suddenly began walking towards Lu XiaoFeng.

He didn't seem to be walking fast at all, but within 2 or 3 steps, he had stepped into the door.

The door had been open all along. He did not knock on the door, nor did he say anything. He just merely, and very casually, sat down opposite of Lu XiaoFeng, grabbed the jug of wine that was sitting on the floor, and sniffed the wine.

"Good wine."

"It is indeed very good wine," Lu XiaoFeng nodded.

"Split it half and half?"

"Sure."

The old man did not say another word. He merely lifted up the jug and began noisily chugging the wine.

In a flash half of the jug was gone and his yellow face had turned into a flushed red color, as if his entire being had been rejuvenated.

"Oh that was good," he said as he wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

Lu XiaoFeng did not reply. He just took a hold of the jug and chugged, not any slower than him, not any slower than anyone.

After the whole jug was finished, the bald old man suddenly burst out laughing. "Good stuff! Wine is good, company isn't too shabby either!"

"Only when the company isn't shabby is the wine good!" Lu XiaoFeng replied as he wiped his mouth.

"Haven't seen you in 3 years," the old man looked at him, "and you still haven't drank yourself to death?"

"Only the good die young, evil seed lives forever. I'm kind of worried about you. You are a good man."

"Who said I was a good man?" The old man shot a look at Lu XiaoFeng.

"Everyone in the martial world says that not only does Shan XiYan have balls, he is loyal too, that he is the best damn man in the world."

"You are an evil seed, and I'm a good man? Pretty damn interesting stuff," the old man laughed heartily.

Princess DanFeng stared at him, almost not believing her own very eyes.

She could have never imagined that this bald, dirty, cursing old man would be the famous hero whose twin iron palms shook the world, Shan XiYan.

No matter what, it's not an easy thing to be referred to as a "hero".

But this old man really just did not look a single bit like a "hero" at all. Could that possibly be the secret to his success? Princess DanFeng could not

figure it out. She suddenly realized that the things she could not figure out on her own seemed to be getting more and more numerous.

Shan XiYan's laughter had already stopped. With those shining eyes of his, he stared at Lu XiaoFeng: "You probably didn't think I was gonna come looking for you."

"No, I didn't," Lu XiaoFeng admitted.

"Actually, I had already known by the time you arrived in TaiYuan."

"Nothing unusual about that," Lu XiaoFeng smiled. "If even you didn't know that I was coming, then that would be quite unusual."

"But only now did I come to meet you!"

"You are a busy man."

"I'm not busy at all. I didn't come, because you were a guest of my martial-uncle. Since there was no way I could compete in being the host with him, so I could only pretend not to know."

"I had thought that because I shaved off my mustache, even old friends didn't recognize me anymore!" Lu XiaoFeng laughed.

Shan XiYan laughed heartily at the joke. "I had always thought that mustache of yours was annoying as hell to look at!"

"I don't care if you found them annoying, some people didn't find them annoying." Lu XiaoFeng casually shot back.

Shan XiYan's laughter stopped again: "Huo TianQing is my martial-uncle, there are many people out there that don't believe it. But you should know better."

"I know."

"That old pipe smoking weirdo is Fan Eh. Do you know him?"

"Could he be the famous Mr. Fan Da whom, by himself, took down Flying Fish Pound, the famous Mr. Fan whose pipe is used to strike only a person's 36 major and 72 minor pressure points?"

"That's him."

"The Twin Aces of the Northwest refers to Fan and Jian. Then that dirty and filthy gentry over there is probably the sole progenitor of the 'Divine Finger Snap', the famous Mr. Jian Er?"

{Note: "Divine Finger Snap", or "Tan Zhi Sheng Tong" is one of the most famous kungfus in the works of Jin Yong, I thought it was very cool that Gu Long acknowledges his friends' works in this way.}

Shan XiYan nodded: "That poor beggar, the lumberjack, the meat bun vendor along with the grocery seller, that make-up powder merchant, plus the keeper of this little place and the fat guy who was greeting people at the front door; the 7 of them are sworn brothers. Some people

call them the '7 Heroes of the City', other call them the '7 Comrades of the Northwest'."

"All these famous heroes and comrades must be in quite good spirit tonight to actually all gathered here in this little court yard to cool off," Lu XiaoFeng casually observed with a smile.

"You really don't know what they are doing here?"

"No idea."

"They are all from my sect. In terms of seniority, some of them are actually 2 generations under Huo TianQing."

"That man is rather lucky," Lu XiaoFeng broke out into another smile.

"Sixty years ago, our Founding Master established in the first rule of Heaven Hunter Sect that should always respect and obey our elders above all. That rule and seniority is never challenged nor questioned."

"Of course not."

"Founding Master dedicated his entire life to the study of martial arts. Only until his late years did he start a family."

"The master himself, Heaven Hunter, actually had a family?"

"Very few people in the pugilist world knew about this event. Founding Master was 77 when he finally had a son."

"And that son is none other than Huo TianQing?"

"Correct."

"I finally understand how in the world, despite his young age, he could have such seniority." Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"It's also why the burden on his shoulders is so overbearing."

"Oh."

Shan XiYan suddenly changed his demeanor into one of extreme earnest: "Not only does he have to continue the Founding Master's lineage, he is also the only person who could make sure that the Heaven Hunter sect survive to the next generation. We all owe nothing short of our lives to our Founding Master. So we would gladly give up our lives in order to make sure that nothing would ever happen to him. I'm sure you understand our sentiments."

"Yes, I do."

Shan XiYan sighed deeply.

"That's why, if he happens to die due to some unfortunately circumstances tomorrow morning. The hundreds of disciples in our

Heaven Hunter sect would not be able to go on living either."

"Why would he die?" Lu XiaoFeng frowned.

"If he loses to you, even if you don't kill him, he would not allow himself to continue living."

"I know what kind of person he is too. But he might not lose."

"Of course he might not."

"If he happens to beat me," Lu XiaoFeng casually observed, "then doesn't the hundreds of disciples of your Heaven Hunter sect gain huge face?"

"You are my friend. I don't want you to lose to him either and damage our friendship."

"You really are a good man."

Shan YanXi's face seemed a little redder.

"If you guys do fight, no matter which one of you win, the result will be too terrible to imagine," He sighed. "Martial-Uncle Huo was at least an acquaintance of yours before this, why go through with this?"

"Now I understand," Lu XiaoFeng smiled. "You want me to, before

sunrise tomorrow, leave this place so he won't be able to find me."

Shan XiYan did not reply. Did not reply in admission.

"Now I understand," Princess DanFeng suddenly coldly interrupted. "You invited all these people here to force him to leave, this way Huo TianQing would win without even having to fight, or else you guys would fight him. It will soon be dawn, so even if he defeat all of you, he would not be in good shape to go up against Huo TianQing once dawn comes."

She stared at him and let out a cold laugh. "Not a bad idea really. Probably something only a hero like yourself could come up with."

Shan XiYan's face turned green, then pale before he suddenly burst out in laughter.

"So true! So true! But even though I, Shan XiYan, isn't much of a 'hero', I certainly won't do a thing like that!"

"So what kind of thing will you do?" Princess DanFeng asked. "If he refuses to leave, then what will you do?"

Shan XiYan suddenly stood up and walked out. The entire court yard, though filled with people, was completely silent. One by one, he looked everyone in the eye with his brilliant eyes.

"If he doesn't leave, then what will you do?" He suddenly asked.

The meat-buns vendor rolled his eyes and coldly replied: "Well isn't that obvious? If he doesn't leave, I'll leave."

Shan XiYan smiled again. But within this smile there seemed to be an indescribable sadness. "If you leave, I leave," he slowly nodded. "Everybody leave."

"If that's the case, then it wouldn't be a problem if I leave a bit early would it?" The vendor replied.

He flipped his hand over and suddenly, with knife that he had somehow pulled out, stabbed toward his own throat.

Not only was this move sure and steady, it was fast, very fast. But somebody was faster than him.

"Dang!" Sparks filled the court yard as the knife in his hand broke into 2 pieces. Something, along with the broken tip of the knife, fell harmlessly onto the ground.

It was one of Lu XiaoFeng's chopsticks.

The other one of the pair was still in his hand. The knife was made of steel, but the chopstick was made of ivory!

There probably isn't too many people that could use an ivory chopstick to break a steel knife.

Princess DanFeng suddenly realized why Shan XiYan did all of this. Huo TianQing can't beat Lu XiaoFeng, other people might not know, but Shan XiYan would know this better than anyone.

That meat-bun selling vendor stared at the piece of the knife that was still in his hand in shock. After a prolonged period, he suddenly stomped his foot on the ground and shouted at Lu XiaoFeng: "Why did you go and do that?"

"No reason really," Lu XiaoFeng smiled. "I just wanted to ask you a question."

"What question?"

"When did I say I wasn't going to leave?"

The vendor was speechless.

"Fighting is such a tiring and troublesome thing to do," Lu XiaoFeng lazily sighed. "Who would want to fight anyways? I much rather go and find some place to take a nap!"

The vendor stared at him, looking as if he was about to cry, but at the same time looking like he want to laugh.

"Good stuff, Lu XiaoFeng really is Lu XiaoFeng!" He suddenly shouted. "From this day forth, whenever you want me to do anything for you, if I even bat an eye, then I'll become your grandson."

"I don't want a grandson like you." Lu XiaoFeng laughed. "As long as you lower the price of your meat buns for me a little next time, I'll be satisfied."

He casually grabbed his big red cape that was hanging on the side of the bed and finished his cup of wine.

"So who wants to come with me to a little village outside of the city to eat Pot Face Zhao's stewed dog meat?"

"Me." Hua ManLou said with a smile.

Mr. Fan suddenly bang his pack of tobacco. "Me too."

"Well, if he's in then I'm in too," Mr. Jian commented.

"Count me in too!" The meat bun vendor shouted at the top of his lungs.

"You only sell those dog beating meat buns, and yet you still dare to go eat dog meat?" Mr. Jian observed with a laugh. "Aren't you afraid that those dogs might go and make trouble once they get inside your stomach?"

The vendor shot him an icy look. "Death doesn't even scare me, nevermind that!"

"Haha, well, you got balls!" Shan XiYan burst out laughing. "Let's all go and eat that damn dog meat. Anyone who doesn't go is a damn son of a turtle!"

Hua ManLuo smiled.

"Seems like it's still worth it to do good," he slowly said.

"Once in a long while is no big deal," Lu XiaoFeng replied, "but I can't make a habit of this."

"Why not?" Hua ManLuo could not help but ask.

"Only the good die young, I'm sure you have heard of that saying before." Lu XiaoFeng said with a straight face.

Even though he put forth a straight face, his eyes were filled with tears.

Princess DanFeng looked at them for a bit before suddenly, and very gently, sighed and quietly said to herself: "Whoever says that it isn't worth it to do good is a damn son of a turtle."

The dog meat was sold out. But they did not care.

They did not really want any dog meat to begin with. What they

wanted was that emotion that warms one's body even more than dog meat. Nothing in the world goes down with wine better than that emotion.

Not to mention that, upon the occasion of the rising of the sun, a person on horse back had chased them down and delivered a letter from Huo TianQing.

"Dawn will always come, what matter may it be that today's matters be settled morrow? Tomorrow comes, what matter may it be that tomorrow's matters be settled morrow's morrow?

"Others trouble me not, what for should I trouble others?

"Golden Roc business, could be settled whenever. Next time Princess visits, will be the day the wandering stops. Once the magnificent treasure lose luster, it becomes the yellow flowers of tomorrow and shines through the ages. Personal loyalty is but two words. TianQing bid farewell."

Just this one letter was like having a hundred cups of wine for 3 days straight, not to mention that heart warming emotion that even a rainstorm could not cool.

The raging thunderstorm started around noon, by that time everyone was drunk. "Not leaving until intoxicated." It was because they were drunk that they had left.

Lu XiaoFeng was drunk but not quite, almost intoxicated but not really, not even he himself could figure out if he was really drunk or sober. He was doing nothing but standing by the window staring out into the raging thunderstorm.

Princess DanFeng looked at him for a while.

"If you didn't go, would all of those men all die there?" She suddenly asked.

Lu XiaoFeng was silent. Silent for a long time.

"Do you understand what the saying: 'some things must, some things must not' means?" He slowly replied.

"Of course I understand. It means that with somethings, if you believe it should not be done, then no matter what other people do to you, tease you, threaten you, even if they put a knife against you neck, you will not ever do it; but if you believe it should be done, then even if it means the loss of your life, you would do it."

Lu XiaoFeng nodded.

"That is exactly why someone would volunteer to swallow burning charcoal to save his comrades and why another would use an club weighing over 40 kilograms to kill a tyrant."

{Note: Lu XiaoFeng makes 2 historical allusions here. The latter of which was a famous assasination attempt on the life of Qing Shi Huang Di, the

first Emperor of China that barely missed his carriage. It was masterminded by Xiang Liang, the uncle of the more famous Xiang Yu, who eventually brought the Qing dynasty to an end. The second one is from Feng Sheng Bang.}

"This is also why Huo TianQing would repay Yan TieShan with death," Princess DanFeng immediately followed, "and why Shan XiYan and those men would not bat an eye to use their life to protect Huo TianQing."

"No matter how they go about it, as long as they can live up to those 2 phrases, then they won't be betraying those 2 words: loyalty and trust."

"But in this world, how many people can really not betray those 2 words?"

Cup in hand, Hua ManLou was quietly murmuring: "Once the magnificent treasure lose luster, it becomes the yellow flowers of tomorrow and shines through the ages. Personal loyalty is but two words.... good show, good show Huo TianQing! I almost underestimated him."

He lifted the cup and happily downed the wine within, seems like he was a bit drunk as well.

"Really a shame about that Su ShaoYing, he was quite a boy as well. He shouldn't have died, shouldn't have died...."

His voice grew fainter and fainter. Putting his head down onto the table, he seemed to have fallen asleep.

Princess DanFeng quietly walked up to the window and gingerly took Lu XiaoFeng's hand in her hand.

"Are you still mad at me?" She asked in a tender voice.

"When did I get mad at you?"

Princess DanFeng gave a winsome smile and bow her head slightly coquettishly.

"Are you afraid to find the wrong person today?" She quietly asked.

Her breathing was gentle, her fingers felt like they were slightly quivering, and her hair carried with them a scent that was sweeter than fresh flowers.

Lu XiaoFeng might have been a gentleman, and might not have been, but he was definitely a man.

A man that was teetering on the brink of intoxication.

Outside the window, the down pour kept coming down, looking like sheet after sheets of dense bead curtains, cutting off the trail walking walkers and the walkers walking trails.

Inside the room was quiet and dark, as if it was dusk.

If one look inside a door that was open in the back of the room, one could see a newly made single bed.

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly discovered that his heart was beating furiously, suddenly discovered that ShangGuan DanFeng's heart was also beating furiously.

"Your heart is jumping."

"Whose heart is beating faster?"

"How could we tell?"

"I'll touch your heart, and you touch mine...."

Suddenly, within the sounds of the rainstorm that sounded like tens of thousands of horses stampeding, there came the sound of horse hooves like that of a torrential downpour. About a dozen riders were approaching this place at a rapid pace despite of the raging rainstorm.

The riders all were green, with white bamboo hats. As they rode past the window, they suddenly all lifted up their arms.

Several "swooshes" could be heard, even more compact than the sound of rain drops and even more hurried than the sound of the horse hooves. Several streaks of black could be seen, some flying in through the window, some hitting the wall outside.

Lu XiaoFeng tilted his body and had already pulled Princess DanFeng to the side of the window.

But Hua ManLou, who had been laying on the table, stood up and shouted: "Sulfric Saltpetre Thunderclap!"

He hadn't even finished those words before, with a deafening bang, where ever the black streaks hit, be it inside or outside, burst into flames towering over several scores of meters. Flames that was blood red with a shade of cruel green.

"You two get out of here, I'll go save Pot Face Zhao!" Lu XiaoFeng shouted.

Pot Face Zhao had already gone to sleep, just a bit earlier they had even heard his snoring.

But the flames looked as if they were about to block off the door way, even the walls outside was on fire, despite of the pouring rain.

Hua ManLou grabbed a hold of Princess DanFeng and charged outside. Those riders had already ran off into the distance. Their maniacal laughter could be heard through the rain as well as a message from one of them.

"Lu XiaoFeng! That was nothing more than a little bit of a warning! If you don't face up to the facts and stop soon, then we'll make sure that nobody could bury your body!"

By the time the final words were heard, the riders and their horses had disappeared behind the curtains of rain drops.

Turning around, Pot Face Zhao's little place was completely engulfed in an inferno. Lu XiaoFeng was nowhere to be seen.

ShangGuan DanFeng gritted her teeth and turned to Hua ManLou: "You wait here, I'm going to go inside for him."

"If you go in there now, you won't be coming back out." Hua ManLou replied.

"But he...."

"Don't worry," Hua ManLou smiled. "He'll make it out. Even fires much bigger than this didn't kill him."

At this moment, from afar, there suddenly came a series of savage cries and desperate screams, just like those bellowed out by a herd of locked up beasts. But the screams stopped very quickly.

Once the cries stopped, the sound of horses neighing in fright that was covered up by the screams could be heard.

ShangGuan DanFeng's expression changed dramatically. "Could those guys have already met their doom at someone else's hands?"

"Boom!" Suddenly, a hole was blown open on the flame-engulfed house's roof.. like a flaming cannon ball, a person came flying out through the hole and, in the middle of the air, amid the pouring rain, did a flip and landed flat onto the ground. Rolling on the ground, the person put out the fire on his body, but on his cloth and in his hair, there were several obvious spots where the fire had charred to crisp.

But he did not seem to care at all and popped right up. It was none other than Lu XiaoFeng.

"Looks like you really can't burn this guy to death!" ShangGuan DanFeng sighed and mumbled to herself.

"Yeah, it really isn't an easy task to burn me to death." Lu XiaoFeng concurred, smiling.

He might be smiling, but his face was entirely blackened by the smoke.

Looking at his face, ShangGuan DanFeng laughed. "But you originally had 4 eye brows, now you almost don't even have one!"

"Not a big deal if all of my eye brows are gone," Lu XiaoFeng casually replied. "The real shame was those jugs of wine...."

"Where's Pot Face Zhao?" Hua ManLou suddenly interrupted him.

"Don't know."

"He wasn't inside?"

"No."

ShangGuan DanFeng's face changed again.

"Could he be with the Green Shirt Pavilion as well? Could he have been with those guys from the very beginning? Otherwise how would they know that you are here?"

She bitterly continued: "You risk your life to save him, and in the process your eye brows gets burned off. But it turned out that he was that kind of a man."

"I only know that he makes the best tasting dog meat."

"And you don't know anything else about him?"

"And I don't know anything else about him."

ShangGuan DanFeng could only stare at him and sigh.

"Why do other people say that you have 2 brains?" She mumbled to herself. "The way I see it, he doesn't even...."

She suddenly stopped, because she suddenly saw someone walking towards them in the rain.

A very big and tall person, wearing a bamboo hat and carrying a bamboo stick upon his shoulder. On that stick was hung a string of objects, she could not quite make out what they were.

But she could tell that this person was none other than Pot Face Zhao.

Lu XiaoFeng smiled.

"You can't be this paranoid about everyone," he casually admonished, "there might not be as many bad people as you think in this world, there are still some...."

His suddenly stopped as well, because he had made out that the objects hanging off of Pot Face Zhao's bamboo stick was a string of hands.

Human hands. Even though the blood marks had been washed away by the rain, they were obviously only recently cut off. Thirteen or fourteen hands, tied together by a belt, hanging off of the bamboo stick.

Inside Pot Face Zhao's belt was a knife, a butcher's knife, used to kill dogs.

"Turns out not only can you kill dogs, you can kill humans too!" Lu XiaoFeng observed as he looked at him with a look of surprise.

Pot Face Zhao cracked open a smile at that comment.

"I don't know how to kill dogs, I have only killed humans."

Lu XiaoFeng stared at him for another prolonged period of time.

"You are not Pot Face Zhao." He finally sighed.

"Who said I was Pot Face Zhao?" That person laughed.

When he laughs, other than cracking open that big mouth of his, nothing else changes on his face.

"Who are you?" Lu XiaoFeng asked.

The person's eyes flashed at the comment.

"Even you can't tell who I am? Well I guess my skills at disguising can't be anything but the best in the world now."

Lu XiaoFeng shot him another look, the suddenly he burst out in laughter.

"Too bad your somersaulting skills aren't up to par...."

"This guy is that little thief that you were talking about earlier?"
ShangGuan DanFeng did not even wait for him to finish before shouting.

"That's right." The person sighed. "I'm guy who competed doing somersaults against him, SiKong ZhaiXing. But I'm not a little thief, I'm a big thief!"

"I know," ShangGuan DanFeng sweetly replied. "Not only are you a big thief, you are the King of Thieves! You have no peers in thievery in the world!"

"I'm not being cocky or arrogant about this," SiKong ZhaiXing said, sticking his chest a little further. "When you are talking about stealing things, even Lu XiaoFeng over there is afraid to go up against me. Now you tell me who can compete with me?"

"You could have disguised as anyone, why a pot face who kills dogs for a living?" ShangGuan DanFeng asked.

"Well, there's a reason behind this," SiKong ZhaiXing laughed and replied. "You see, if you disguise yourself as a pot face, then it'll be really hard for other people to see through your disguise."

"Why?"

"When was the last time you saw a couple of people inspecting the face of a person with a pot face very closely?"

ShangGuan DanFeng laughed as well.

"It looks like there's something to disguising yourself isn't there?"

"Quite a bit actually."

"Since when did you get here?" Lu XiaoFeng frowned.

"Two days ago."

"What for?"

"Waiting for your!"

"Waiting for me?"

"Because if you want to go find Old Man Yan, this would be a place that you must pass. Besides, now that you are in the general area of TaiYuan, there was no way you wouldn't come and get a bit of Pot Face Zhao's dog meat."

He sighed in resignation.

"Even I have to admit that his stewed dog meat is without peer in the world," he continued.

"That's why you said that the dog meat were all sold out, because you were afraid that would reveal your true identity."

"Well, no matter what," SiKong ZhaiXing replied, laughing heartily, "at

least I was finally able to trick you, you devil you."

"So what were you doing waiting for me?"

"What do I do?"

"You are actually going to steal from me?"

"As long as you can say it, I can steal it!" SiKong ZhaiXing boasted.

"What do you want to steal from me?"

"You sure you want me to tell you?"

"If you are afraid to say it, then I won't force you," Lu XiaoFeng casually answered.

"Why would I be afraid to say it?" SiKong ZhaiXing demanded, staring hard at him.

"So what is it that you want to steal?" ShangGuan DanFeng finally gave into her urge and asked.

"You."

ShangGuan DanFeng's eyes were wide in shock.

"Someone offered up 20,000 taels of silver for me to steal you."

"Can't believe that I'm actually worth 20,000 taels of silver..." she did not finish, because she was blushing to the very base of her ears.

"But the reason that person want me to steal you is not the reason that you are thinking of," SiKong ZhaiXing laughed.

Still blushing, ShangGuan DanFeng could not help but shout back: "How do you know what kind of reason I'm thinking of?"

SiKong ZhaiXing blinked his eyes, but did not reply.

"What does that person want?" ShangGuan DanFeng asked. "Who is that person?"

SiKong ZhaiXing still did not reply.

"He won't tell you," Lu XiaoFeng sighed. "In his business, if he told his employer's secrets, then who would come to him for a job next time?"

"Thieves have employers going to them and offering jobs?" ShangGuan DanFeng asked.

"I have already told you, he's different. He never steals anything that worth anything."

"But I still have to eat!" SiKong ZhaiXing added. "That why I only steal when other people come to me and ask me to with a huge wad of cash."

"Only that there isn't that many people that can offer up that much money for you to accept a job."

"Correct, depressingly few."

"So even if you don't tell me, I already know who hired you this time."

"Whether or not you know is your business, whether or not I tell you is my business."

"No matter if I know it or not, you would never tell me, right?"

"Right."

"Then how come you suddenly changed your mind just now and let me in on this secret?"

"You risked your life to save me in the fire, and almost lost your eye brows in the process" SiKong ZhaiXing sighed. "How could I have the nerve to steal your friend?"

"Looks like your are not entirely incorrigible."

"Correct again."

"If you have the nerve, could you really just steal me away?" ShangGuan DanFeng, not able to hold it inside anymore, interrupted in a loud voice.

"Don't forget," SiKong ZhaiXing boasted, "that I am the King of Thieves! There's nothing in the world that I can't steal."

"I would like to hear how exactly you plan on doing this." ShangGuan DanFeng sneered.

"Have you ever heard of any herbalist telling other people his business secrets?"

"No."

"Well, this would be my little business secret," SiKong ZhaiXing righteously, "so I can't tell you."

ShangGuan DanFeng stared at him in anger.

"'Ten pot faces, 9 freaks', I say that you are a pot face to begin with!" She suddenly said.

"Who said that?" SiKong ZhaiXing shot her a look and asked.

"Me! If not then tear off that pot face mask of yours and let me see what

you really look like!" ShangGuan DanFeng replied.

"That can't be done!"

"Why not?"

"What if you fall for me? Then Lu XiaoFeng would make us do somersaults again! That last time I ended up sick and nauseas, no way I would go through with that again."

ShangGuan DanFeng blushed and, despite all her efforts, laughed.

"Whose hands are these?" Lu XiaoFeng asked.

"Belong to those guys who set the house on fire."

"You chased them down?"

"I am pretending to be Pot Face Zhao after all. If someone burns down his house, I should at least help him get a little bit of justice."

"So you cut off their hands so that they could not burn down houses any more." ShangGuan DanFeng observed.

"I'm also planning to sell those horses of theirs to pay back Pot Face Zhao."

"Where are those guys now?" Lu XiaoFeng asked.

"Over there in the woods, I left them there especially for you."

"What for?"

"They tried to burn you to death," SiKong ZhaiXing replied, "don't you want to interrogate them and ask them why?"

Chapter 8 - Vengeance and Formidable Foe

A rainstorm is like the prodigal son that crashes into the rich woman's boudoir in the middle of the night, it comes suddenly and is even quicker going away.

But everything it left behind was changed because of it.

Every tree and leaf in the woods had been washed to a jade color, and the blood on the corpses were washed off too. Making it almost impossible to find the fatal wound.

But of these dozen or so men, not one of them was still alive.

When they found the bodies, SiKong ZhaiXing had already disappeared.

"Leaving these bodies to us, does he want us to clean up after his mess?" ShuangGuan DanFeng bitterly commented.

"He didn't kill these men," Lu XiaoFeng replied. "Very rarely does he ever kill."

"If not him then whom?" Inquired ShangGuan DanFeng.

"The very same man who ordered them to set fire to the place."

"What you are saying, is that he was afraid that we might be able to find out who he is from them, so he killed them to protect himself?"

Lu XiaoFeng nodded. His face was stern and tight. Of the three things he hated the most, killing was the first among them.

"But he could have just released these men, why did he have to kill them?" ShuangGuan DanFeng wondered.

"Because a dozen or so men whose right hand had been chopped off is very easy to track down."

Princess DanFeng sighed. "Actually, killing all these men was quite useless, we still know where they were from."

"Do you know?"

"You can't tell that they are from the Green Shirt Pavilion?"

Lu XiaoFeng did not reply. After a long silence, he slowly replied: "I can only figure out one thing."

"And what's that?"

"I figured out that you would undoubtedly run to Pearl and Diamond Pavilion and instruct people to come here to clean up the bodies."

ShangGuan DanFeng shot him a look before looking down shyly.

"What else have you figured out?" She asked, biting her lip.

"That afterwards, you would undoubtedly tell people to prepare a bath for you, then you would pick a nice and comfortable room and get a good sleep."

He gave a little smile and continued.

"Don't forget, that place belongs to you now."

Lu XiaoFeng leaned back in the tub of hot water and closed his eyes. After being drenched in rain, it really is quite a joy to be able to find a place to enjoy a hot bath.

He felt that his luck had been pretty good. On the stove by his side rested a big bronze kettle and the water inside was almost boiling. The room was almost filled with steam, giving off an air of security and comfort.

Hua ManLou had already taken a bath and was probably sleeping by now. ShangGuan DanFeng was probably already at Pearl and Diamond Pavilion.

Even though she really did not want to in her heart, she still left, seemingly very obedient to Lu XiaoFeng.

This also made him felt very satisfied, he liked the girls who listened.

But it's just that he just did not feel very satisfied about this entire matter, as if there was something in all of this that just did not fit. But for the life of him, he could not figure out where exactly doesn't it fit.

Before he died, Yan TieShan admitted his crimes of the past, and Huo TianQing had already agreed to let this whole matter slide.

The favor that he promised to Golden Roc Emperor was at least, technically, one third accomplished, and very smoothly accomplished at that.

So what could be bothering him?

The rain had stopped a long time ago, once in a while the sounds of water droplets could be heard, the night breeze was refreshing and clean.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed and decided that he should stop thinking these crazy thoughts and learn to become a person who knows when to be satisfied.

This was when he heard the sound of a door being opened.

His hearing was fine, the door was pushed open by someone.

But he was not sure whether or not his eyes were fine, what he saw walking in was four women.

Four young and beautiful women, not only good looking, but graceful as well, wearing the type of clothing that made their thin and slender bodies that much more tempting.

Lu XiaoFeng loves those women with narrow waists and long legs, and those four women just happened to have very narrow waists and very long legs.

Smiling, they sauntered in, as if there wasn't a naked man sitting in a bath tub in the middle of the room at all.

But those 4 pairs of bright and beautiful eyes were all permanently fixed upon Lu XiaoFeng's face.

Lu XiaoFeng wasn't a shy person by any stretch of imagination, but at this moment his face felt like it was burning, he did not need a mirror to know that he was blushing.

"I heard that Lu XiaoFeng has 4 eye brows, but how come I only see 2?" Someone suddenly laughed.

"You can see 2? I can't even see one." Another replied in laughter.

The one who spoke first was the tallest and had a pair of long and narrow phoenix like eyes, even when she was laughing, it carried a kind of murderous air with it.

Anybody can tell that she was definitely not a woman who helps men take baths.

But she walked over and picked up the kettle on the stove.

"Water seems to have cooled a little," she smiled. "Let me add a bit of hot water for you."

Lu XiaoFeng glanced at the steam produced by the water inside the kettle and was a bit shocked, but to ask him, naked as a new born baby, to stand up in front of four women, was too much even for him.

But if this big kettle of boiling water was poured onto him, that feeling couldn't be very good.

Just as Lu XiaoFeng was having a dilemma deciding whether he was better off moving to stand up or remaining still sitting in the tub, he suddenly discovered that he couldn't move if he wanted to.

The girl who had not spoken a word, the girl who looked the quietest and gentlest, had suddenly taken out, from her sleeve, a little less than half-meter long, glowing dagger and held it up against his neck.

The dark and cold feel of the dagger caused the area from behind his ears to all the way down to his shoulders to be covered with goose

bumps.

That tall and phoenix-eyed girl had slowly began to pour the boiling water into his tub.

"You better behave, we sisters might be warm, gentle, polite, and quiet, but we never blink when it comes to killing." She casually said. "This kettle of water, if poured on someone's body, even if he doesn't die, he would lose a layer of skin that's for sure."

She kept on pouring the water into the tub as she talked.

The water in the tub was pretty hot to begin with, now it was almost hot enough to make people scream.

Sweat had begun to form on Lu XiaoFeng's head but only about a fourth of the water inside the kettle had been added.

If the whole kettle was added, then the person inside the tub would probably lose a layer of skin as well.

Lu XiaoFeng laughed ----- he actually laughed.

The delicate yet fierce eyes of the water-pouring girl stared at him.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself." She coldly observed.

Lu XiaoFeng did seem to be enjoying himself.

"I only think it's quite funny," he replied with a smile.

"Funny? What's so funny?" The girl seemed to be pouring a bit faster.

But Lu XiaoFeng kept on smiling.

"In the future when I tell people that, while I was taking a bath, I had the Four Beauties (4 Xiu) of E'Mei was by my side adding water for me; I would be shocked if anyone would believe me."

Turned out he had already guessed who they were.

"So it turned out your eyes aren't that bad," the tall and phoenix-eyed girl sneered. "You are right, I am Ma XiuZheng."

"And this one who doesn't blink when killing, could you be Shi XiuYun?" Lu XiaoFeng pondered.

Shi XiuYun's smile was even more warm and gentle.

"But when I kill you, I would blink at least a little," she replied in a gentle voice.

"That's why we actually don't want to kill you, but only want to ask you a couple of questions," Ma XiuZheng said. "If you answer them quickly,

then this kettle of water won't be poured in, but if not, then when all the water is poured in...."

Shi XiuYun sighed and continued. "By then you would probably be cooked."

"A cooked pig you could at least sell the pig meat, but a cook man would probably have to be fed to the dogs," Sun XiuQing sighed.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed too.

"I'm about cooked now, so why don't you hurry up and ask already."

"Alright, let me ask you, did our martial brother Su ShaoYing die in the hands of XiMen ChuiXue?" Ma XiuZheng spoke for the group.

"If you already knew, then why ask me?" Lu XiaoFeng replied with a rather pitiful smile.

"So where is XiMen ChuiXue now?"

"I'm looking for him too, if you gals see him, could you gals tell me?"

"You really don't know where he is?"

"I only lie to women when I'm drunk, but right now I am very very sober."

Ma XiuZheng gritted her teeth a bit and suddenly poured quite a bit of the water into the tub.

"You better be honest when talking to me," she coldly threatened.

"How can I not be honest at this moment?" Lu XiaoFeng's pitiful smile turned even more pitiful.

"That woman that was with you, is she really the princess of the Golden Roc Dynasty?"

"That is correct."

"The Golden Roc Emperor is still alive?"

"Still alive."

"And he was the one that wanted you to deal with Yan TieShan?"

"Yes."

"Who else did he want you to deal with?"

"ShangGuan Mu and Yan DuHe."

"Who are those two?" Ma XiuZheng frowned. "I never even heard of their names before."

"The number of names you haven't heard before probably numbers in the then tens of millions." Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

Ma XiuZheng stared at him.

"I'm not wearing any cloths," Lu XiaoFeng sighed. "If you keep on staring at me like this, I'm going to blush."

He did not blush, but Ma XiuZheng did.

She suddenly turned away, placed the kettle back onto the stove, adjusted her clothing, and bowed toward Lu XiaoFeng. Shi XiuYun's sword had been taken away too.

Four well dressed, beautiful young females suddenly all bowing towards a completely naked man sitting in a bath tub; if you have seen a scene like this, there was no way you could dream what it looked like.

Lu XiaoFeng looked like he was a bit shocked too. He could not imagine how these 4 fiesty and commanding girls had suddenly became this polite.

"E'Mei disciples Ma XiuZheng, Yie XiuZhu, Sun XiuQing, and Shi XiuYun, carrying out our master's wishes, has come to invite Mr. Lu to lunch tomorrow. Don't know if Mr. Lu would come or not." Ma XiuZheng said, still bowing.

Lu XiaoFeng was speechless for quite a bit before forcing up another pitiful smile.

"I do want to come, but pity that even if I grew wings, there is no way I could make it to E'Mei Mountain by tomorrow noon."

Ma XiuZheng cracked a smile.

"Master is not at E'Mei, at this moment he is waiting for Mr. Lu's arrival at Pearl and Diamond Pavilion."

Lu XiaoFeng was shocked again.

"He's here too? When did he arrive?"

"Just arrived today."

"If we haven't dropped by Pearl and Diamond Pavilion, how could we have known about what happened last night?" Shi XiuYun added on sweetly.

Lu XiaoFeng smiled again, of course, another pitiful smile.

"If Mr. Lu want to come, then we don't dare to bother you anymore, farewell." Ma XiuZheng spoke up again.

"You don't have any other questions to ask me?"

Ma XiuZheng smiled and shook her head, her manner was gentle and polite, her smile was warm, seemingly completely forgotten about that whole incident about cooking him.

Yie XiuZhu however, being a honest girl, couldn't help but laugh a little. "We had long heard of the famed name of Mr. Lu. So we dared to come to you while you are taking a bath."

"Actually, you could have come at any time and asked me any question and I wouldn't have refused you the answers," Lu XiaoFeng said with a forced smile.

Shi XiuYun blinked. "Are you not mad Mr. Lu?"

"How could I be mad? In fact, I'm happy as hell."

It is Shi XiuYun's turn to be taken aback.

"We treated you like that, and you are still happy?"

Lu XiaoFeng laughed ----- a real laugh this time.

"Not only am I happy," he replied with a smile. "I should thank all of you for this great opportunity."

"What opportunity?" Shi XiuYun had to ask.

"When I'm taking a bath, you gals can just barge in here," Lu XiaoFeng casually replied, "so you gals shoudln't be mad at all when I barge in while you are taking a bath. Not every guy in the world has an opportunity like that, how could I not be happy?"

All four of the the Four Beauties of E'Mei blushed. Suddenly, they all turned and rushed out of the door.

Only now did Lu XiaoFeng let out a deep sigh.

"Looks like from now on, I'm going to have to wear pants when I take a bath," he mumbled to himself.

Where Lu XiaoFeng was taking a bath was a kitchen, there is a little yard outside, in that yard there stood a ginkgo tree.

The night was cool and clear, the waxing moon looking as if it hanged off of the branches of the tree with the dew on the leaves blocking and altering the shade of the moon. Inside the shadow casted by the tree, there was a person standing there, absolutely still, tall, straight, white clothed like snow, with an odd shaped sword carried across his back in an ebony sheath.

As soon as the Four Beauties of E'Mei rushed out of the door, they saw him. As soon as one catches the glimpse of this man, one would

involuntarily shudder at the feeling of ice that shoots from one's heart all the way to one's finger nails.

"XiMen ChuiXue!" Ma XiuZheng let out a yell.

XiMen ChuiXue coldly stared at them, slowly nodded.

"You killed Su ShaoYing?" Ma XiuZheng madly demanded.

"You want revenge?"

"We was just going to go look for you," Ma XiuZheng sneered. "Didn't think that you would dare come here!"

XiMen ChuiXue's eyes suddenly began to glow, glow terrifyingly bright.

"I don't usually kill woman, but woman shouldn't practice sword," XiMen ChuiXue coldly replied. "Those who practice swords aren't women."

"Bullsh1t!" Shi XueYun shouted back in rage.

"Why don't you all unsheath your swords and come at me at once," XiMen ChuiXue's face darkened.

"We don't need to all come at you, just little me is enough to kill you!" Shi XiuYun shouted.

She looked to be the calmest and nicest, but in reality her temper is the shortest and worst of them all.

That pair of short swords she used was the weapons passed down from the famed swordswoman from the Tang Dynasty, First Madame SunGong.

As she was shouting, the swords was already in her hands. The glow of the blade wavered like the dragon in the sky and struck down like lightning as she and her sword charged toward XiMen ChuiXue.

"Hold on," suddenly someone gently said.

As soon as those words were uttered, the man appeared.

As soon as Shi XiuYun struck out with her swords, she suddenly realized that neither of swords could be moved ----- the two blades of her swords had just been caught between the fingers of the man who just appeared.

She never actually saw what this man's moves were, she tried to pull her swords out, but it felt as if the blades had taken root on that man's fingers.

But this man's expression was still very peaceful, even smiling.

But Shi XiuYun's face was red with anger. "Didn't think XiMen ChuiXue actually has helpers," she coldly laughed.

"You think he's my helper?" XiMen ChuiXue coldly replied.

"Isn't he?"

XiMen ChuiXue let out a cold little laugh and suddenly moved. A flash of brilliant light like a rainbow colored lightning was all that could be seen for a moment, then it disappeared.

XiMen ChuiXue had turned around and the sword had returned to its sheath.

"If he didn't make a move, you would be like this tree by now," he coldly observed.

Shi XiuYun was just about to ask him what about this tree, but before she opened her mouth, she suddenly discovered that the tree was falling.

During that brief flash of sword, this tree, so big that a person can barely put his arm around the whole trunk, was cut in half.

The tree was falling, and XiMen ChuiXue was gone.

Shi XiuYun's expression was frozen. In this world, how could there be such a sword style? such quickness? She almost could not believe her own eyes.

The tree was almost about to fall on the person opposite her when he

turned around, raised his arms, and gently pushed. The tree slowly and gently fell on the ground next to him. This man's expression was still very serene and still carried that same warm smile.

"I'm not his helper," he slowly said. "I never help anyone kill."

Shi XiuYun's pale face turned red once again. Now she understood what this man was doing, and also understood that XiMen ChuiXue's words were true. Even though her had a bad temper, she still could tell what's right and what's bad, and she bowed her head in embarrassment .

"Thank you," she finally gathered up enough courage to say. "May I please know your surname?"

"My surname is Hua," this man, obviously Hua ManLou, answered.

"I... I'm Shi XiuYun, that tallest one over there is my eldest martial sister Ma XiuZheng."

"Is she the one who spoke earlier?"

"Yes."

"Her voice is very easily distinguishable," Hua ManLou smiled. "Next time I'll surely be able to recognize her."

Shi XiuYun thought that was a little odd.

"You have to hear her talk to be able to distinguish her?" She had to ask.

Hua ManLou nodded.

"Why?"

"Because I'm blind."

Shi XiuYun was speechless.

This man, who could catch her blade within his fingers as if it was the easiest thing in the world, was blind. She could not believe it.

The moonlight shone on Hua ManLou's face, his smile was still that serene, that warm, anyone could tell that he was a man who was full of passion about life and not be depressed or mad because he was blind, and would never be jealous or envious of other people.

Because he was already satisfied with everything in his life, because he had been enjoying this beautiful thing that is life.

Shi XiuYun stared at him, her heart suddenly filled with a kind of indescribable feeling, she could not tell whether it was sympathy, pity, or admiration.

She only knew that she had never felt this before.

"You sisters are all waiting for you," Hua ManLou said, smiling.
"Shouldn't you be going?"

Shi XiuYun shyly bowed her head.

"If we meet again, would you be able to recognize me?" She suddenly asked.

"Of course, I can tell from your voice."

"But... what if I have become a mute by then?"

Now it was Hua ManLou's turn to be speechless.

Nobody had ever asked him that before, and he never imagined that anyone would have.

He was just puzzled over how he should answer that when he suddenly realized she had walked up to him and grabbed his hand.

"Feel my face," she gently said, "then even if I couldn't speak, all you have to do is feel my face and you would know who I am, right?"

Hua ManLou silently nodded as he felt his fingers touch her silky smooth and flawless face.

His heart suddenly also filled with a kind of indecribable feeling.

Ma XiuZheng was looking at them from afar and looked as if she was about to go up and get her younger martial sister but finally decided against it.

When she turned around, she saw that Sun XiuQing and Yie XiuZhu were both looking at them too, their eyes filled with a special type of feeling, almost as if they were entranced.

Shi XiuYun doing this did not surprise them, because all of them always knew that their little martial sister was the type of girl that dared to love and hate. Did they wish in their hearts that they could be just as courageous as her?

To love, also takes courage.

Shi XiuYun left, they all left ----- four young and beautiful girls together, they came like the wind and left like the wind too. Nobody could figure out when they would come and nobody could figure out when they would leave.

But Hua ManLou was still standing there, motionless, seemingly entranced.

The wind was lightly blowing, the moon gently shining down, his smile looked peaceful and happy.

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly laughed.

"I am willing to bet."

"Bet on what?"

"I bet that you won't feel like washing your hands for at least 3 days!"

Hua ManLou sighed.

"I don't understand why you always think that other people are like just like you."

"What about me?"

"You are not a gentleman," Hua ManLou put up a serious face, "not one bit!"

Lu XiaoFeng laughed.

"The most lovable thing about me, is that I would never put up a serious face and pretend to be a gentleman."

Hua ManLou could not hold back his laughter anymore either.

"I say you better be careful," Lu XiaoFeng suddenly observed.

"Careful? What for?"

"Recently you seem to be getting pretty lucky in the women department, when a man suddenly gets lucky like this, trouble usually isn't far behind."

"Another thing I don't understand," Hua ManLou sighed.

"Oh?"

"How come you could always see other people's troubles, but never your own?"

Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"Because I'm an a\$\$hole," Lu XiaoFeng offered, with a pitiful smile.

"As long as a person knows that he's an a\$\$hole, there's still hope for him," Hua ManLou laughed.

"So who do you think hired SiKong ZhaiXing to steal ShuangGuan DanFeng?" Lu XiaoFeng suddenly asked after a prolonged period of silence.

"Huo Xiu," Hua ManLou answered without the slightest hesitation.

"That's right, it has to be him."

"There aren't that many people who are able to spend 200 thousand taels of silver to get SiKong ZhaiXing."

"So from this, it seems that the Golden Roc Emperor wasn't lying, Huo Xiu is ShangGuan Mu."

Hua ManLou concurred.

"And DuGu YiHe must be Yan DuHe, that's why he would go to Pearl and Diamond Pavilion, and that's why he would send his disciples to come and find me."

"When he came here, he probably did not know that something already happened to Yan TieShan," Hua ManLou added.

"He might have already agreed with Yan TieShan to come together and discuss something."

"Very likely."

"And the matter they were planning to discuss could it be how to deal with the Golden Roc Emperor?"

"Also very likely."

"And he sent the Four Beauties of E'Mei ask me those questions, so he pretty much admitted his relationship with the Golden Roc Emperor."

"So you think that he shouldn't have done this."

"We don't have any evidence that could prove he is Yan DuHe, and he didn't need to admit it either, unless...."

"Unless he already knows of a plan to make you stop meddling with other people's affairs."

Lu XiaoFeng slowly nodded. "Unless he already figured out an ingenious plan."

"The best plans are always the same."

"Of course, when a person is dead, he can't meddle with other people's affairs."

"So you think he has set up a trap there and is waiting for you to jump in?"

"He doesn't need to set up any kind of traps," Lu XiaoFeng forced a smile. "Those 49 moves of his 'Sabre Sword Twin Kill' was probably enough to make me stop meddling in other people's affairs."

"Rumor said that of the masters of the 7 main sword sects in the world today, his kungfu is the best, because on top of the fact that he has

mastered the E'Mei Sect kungfu inside and out, he had originally learned many very devious and strong skills that nobody has seen him use yet."

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly jumped up.

"Let's go!"

"Go where?"

"Pearl and Diamond Pavilion, where else?"

"The meeting is arranged to be tomorrow noon, why do we have to go now?"

"It's better to be early than to be late."

"Are you worried about ShangGuan DanFeng?"

"A man of DuGu YiHe's stature would do anything to a girl."

"Then who are you worried about?"

"XiMen ChuiXue."

Hua ManLou's expression changed.

"That's right, if he found out that DuGu YiHe is at Pearl and Diamond Pavilion, he would probably be heading that way now."

"I'm worried that he might be able to handle DuGu YiHe's Sabre Sword Twin Kill," Lu XiaoFeng explained. "With his skills, you really shouldn't worry about him. But he is too conceited, conceit can lead to mistakes, mistakes can lead to death."

"I don't like him," Hua ManLou sighed. "But I have to admit that he does have much to be conceited about."

"He only observed Su ShaoYing make 21 moves before deciding that he could beat DuGu YiHe's Sabre Sword Twin Kill, but he probably didn't think much about the fact that Su ShaoYing isn't DuGu YiHe."

"What kind of a person is DuGu YiHe anyways?"

Lu XiaoFeng thought for a while.

"There is a type of person that even though I don't want to become friends with, I really don't want to become enemies with either," he spoke slowly.

"And DuGu YiHe is this type of a person?"

Lu XiaoFeng nodded.

"No matter who, if he knew that he has an enemy like him, he wouldn't

be able to sleep, so we might as well start walking." Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

Hua ManLou suddenly laughed.

"I don't think he's sleeping right now either."

"How come?"

"No matter who, if he knew that he has an enemy like you, he wouldn't be able to sleep either."

DuGu YiHe was not sleeping. It was deep in the night, and the April night breezes carried with it a seemingly Autumn chill as they blew past the white curtains in the hall.

The coffin was made from Violet Nanmu, very sturdy, very expensive.

But the person was already dead, did it really make a difference what kind of coffin he was lying in?

The candle light flickered in the wind as the mourning hall was filled with a unspeakable chill and melancholy.

DuGu YiHe silently stood there besides Yan TieShan's shrine, he hadn't moved for a long long time.

He was a tall and serious man, he still stood straight the way he used to when he was young, and his needle like hair was still ebony black colored. Only the wrinkles on his face were many and deep, only when you see his face would you know that he was indeed an old man.

At this moment, on that serious and resolute face of his, there was a look of sadness and loneliness.

Was this because he's already a dead man and already understood how sad and horrifying death really is?

Behind him suddenly came a series of very light foot steps, he did not turn around, but his hand had already gripped the handle of his sword.

His sword was thicker and bigger than the average sword with the blade being extra long and wide.

The blade was made of bronze and polished to a incredible shine, but the sheath was very old and dirty with a small Eight Diagram carved on it, to symbolize that this was the sword of the head of the E'Mei Sect.

A person slowly walked up from behind him and stopped next to him. Even though he did not turn to look, he knew that this was Huo TianQing.

Huo TianQing's expression was very sad too, very somber, other than the black clothes on the inside, he wore a yellow colored mourning shirt, showing that his relationship with the deceased was special.

DuGu YiHe had never seen this proud and powerful young man before, he had never even been here before.

Huo TianQing stood there, at his side, for a long time before suddenly speaking up.

"Still haven't fallen asleep, Father?"

DuGu YiHe did not answer. Because this was a question that did not need to be answered, if he was standing here, then of course he still hasn't fallen asleep.

His position and fame had given him the right to not answer this kind of questions.

But Huo TianQing continued.

"You have never been here before have you Father?"

"Never."

"That's why even I didn't know that Father and Boss Yan were such good friends!"

DuGu YiHe's face darkened.

"There are plenty of things that you don't know about," he coldly

replied.

"Father is one of the leaders of the martial world," Huo TianQing casually replied. "So of course Father would know more than I."

"Hmph!"

Huo TianQing suddenly turned his head and stared at his face with a knife-like stare.

"Then Father must know why he died!" Huo TianQing said slowly.

DuGu YiHe's face seemed to have changed colors a bit as he suddenly turned around and started to walk out.

"Stop!" Huo TianQing ordered.

DuGu YiHe's last step hit down hard, shattering the tile on the floor to pieces. The veins on his hands were popping out as the cape he was wearing fluttered without any wind present. After a long time, he slowly turned around, rage shot out of his eyes towards Huo TianQing as he, careful to enunciate every syllable demanded.

"Are you telling me to stop?"

Huo TianQing's face darkened too.

"That's right, I'm telling you to stop!" Huo TianQing coldly replied.

"You don't have the authority!" DuGu YiHe shouted in rage.

"I don't? Age-wise, I'm not up to par with you," Huo TianQing sneered. "But if we are going by stature and seniority, then Huo TianQing isn't any lower than DuGu YiHe!"

"What kind of stature and seniority do you have?" DuGu YiHe angrily demanded.

"I know you don't recognize me or know me, but surely you recognize this move."

He was standing face to face with DuGu YiHe, then suddenly he twisted his waist to the right and slightly spread his arms, "Phoenix Spreading Its Wings", two fingers on his left hand were bent like the beak of the phoenix as they thrust towards DuGu YiHe's head.

DuGu YiHe's right palm shoots up sideways, towards his foe's wrist.

Suddenly, Huo TianQing's steps slid lightly and shot out sideways about a meter, his whole person ending up behind DuGu YiHe's right shoulder. The posture was still the same "Phoenix Spreading Its Wings", but his direction of the move had been completely and instantaneously altered as he was using his right hand to simulate the beak to attack the artery at the right base of DuGu YiHe's neck.

Even though this change looked simple, the ingenuity behind it was

something that's impossible to describe using words.

"Fly, Twin Phoenix!" DuGu YiHe let it slip out of his mouth.

Even as he spoke, he suddenly twisted his body to the left and used his left palm to meet Huo TianQing's beak.

Huo TianQing exhaled, using the power of "Small Star" from within his palms to flip them outward.

"Pshhh!"

The two pairs of hands met and instantly, both men stopped moving.

Having already exhaled, Huo TianQing began to slowly speak.

"That's correct, that was exactly 'Fly, Twin Phoenix'. Once upon a time when Heaven Hunter visited E'Mei by himself and dueled with your master, the honorable Father Hu, at the top of E'Mei, he used this move, you probably saw it as a spectator didn't you?"

"That's right."

Even though DuGu YiHe only said those 2 words, his face seemed to have turned a shade green.

When masters exchange moves, once they begin using their inner

strength to fight, they should not and could not talk.

But Heaven Hunter was an incredible martial arts genius, he created a type of inner strength where you could speak. And not only was there no damage to your inner strength when you talk, it actually allows the energy stored in your reservoir of inner strength to shoot out.

Huo TianQing's inner strength was learned under Heaven Hunter himself, and at this moment, he planned on using this very fact to defeat DuGu YiHe.

"The usual kungfu masters, when met with this move, would twist to the right and use their right palm to meet this move," Huo TianQing continued. "But Father Hu was indeed a master of his generation, he actually went against convention and met it with his left palm, do you know why?"

"If you meet with your right palm, even though it is quicker, your options would all be exhausted in what you could do; but if you meet with with your left palm, there would still be some left over energy and power that would let you change and adapt according to will...."

DuGu YiHe did not want to answer, but he did not want to show weakness either, when he got to there, he suddenly felt as if he could not keep up his breathing and had to stop.

"Correct, it was precisely because of that Heaven Hunter had to resort to such a confrontational move and fight in terms of inner strength, to effectively nullify his options...."

"How did you found out about this?" DuGu YiHe suddenly shouted, as if he did not want to hear him ramble on anymore.

"Simply because Heaven Hunter is my father."

DuGu YiHe's facial expression noticeably changed.

"Father Hu and my father were of the same generation, you probably know about this right?" Huo TianQing casually said.

DuGu YiHe's face changed from green to white and back to green again, not only could he not speak, he really did not have anything to say.

Heaven Hunter's seniority at the time was above everyone else, to say that he and Father Hu were of the same generation was giving Father Hu and enormous amount of face.

Even though DuGu YiHe was a proud man, he could not fly in the face of martial arts tradition.

"So you should by now, know who I am and what my stature is," Huo TianQing casually continued. "But I still got a couple of questions to ask you!"

DuGu YiHe gritted his teeth as sweat began to appear on his forehead.

"Why did you make Su ShaoYu change his name and pretend to be a student? You and Boss Yan had never had any contact before, how come

you suddenly come barging in just after he dies?"

"These things have nothing to do with you."

"I can't ask these things?"

"You can't ask these things."

"Don't forget I am the warden of this place," Huo TianQing coldly reminded DuGu YiHe. "If I can't ask questions about matters around here, then who can?"

The sweat on DuGu YiHe's forehead were dropping like rain as the tiles below his feet all crack into little tiny pieces. Suddenly, he kicked up his right leg and grabbed his sword with his right hand.

But precisely at that instant, the force coming from Huo TianQing's palms disappeared as he, actually borrowing DuGu YiHe's energy, gently flew out.

DuGu YiHe instantly lost his center of gravity and was just about to fall over. Suddenly there was a flash of sword followed by a sound of sword hitting tile with sparks flying everywhere as the sword in his hand was driven into the tiles.

But Huo TianQing had disappeared.

The white curtains fluttered in the wind, the candles on the shrine table

suddenly extinguished.

DuGu YiHe, leaning against the sword for support, facing the darkness, suddenly felt very tired. He was getting old after all.

Pulling out his sword and putting it back into its sheath, he slowly walked out; in the darkness, there seemed to be a pair of shining eyes coldly staring at him.

He looked up, and saw a person motionlessly standing beneath the white poplar tree in the yard, a person wearing all white, like the snow.

DuGu YiHe's hand went to his sword again.

"Who is it?" He demanded in a fierce voice.

That man did not answer, but countered with a question of his own.

"Yan DuHe?"

DuGu YiHe's face suddenly tightened.

The man in white had slowly walked out from the darkness and into the moonlight. His snow white cloths had nary a speck of dirt on them, his face was expressionless, and carried across his back was an odd shaped sword in a dark sheath.

DuGu YiHe's expression noticeably changed.

"XiMen ChuiXue?"

"Yes."

"Did you kill Su ShaoYing?" DuGu YiHe angrily demanded.

"I did kill him, but he did not deserve to die. The one who deserved to die is Yan DuHe!"

DuGu YiHe's pupils dilated.

"So if you are Yan DuHe, then I will kill you!" XiMen ChuiXue coldy spoke.

DuGu YiHe suddenly burst out in a mad laugh.

"You can't kill Yan DuHe, you can only kill DuGu YiHe."

"Oh?"

"If you killed DuGu YiHe, then your name would be famous throughout the land!"

"Good." XiMen ChuiXue sneered.

"Good?"

"It doesn't matter if you are a lonely crane or just a crane, I will kill you!"

{Note: another play on words that does not translate over. DuHe literally means "lonesome crane", while YiHe literally means "one crane".}

"Good." DuGu YiHe suddenly sneered too.

"Good?"

"It doesn't matter if you want to kill a lonely crane or just a crane, why don't you unsheath your sword?"

"Good, great!"

DuGu YiHe gripped the handle of his sword, he could only think of how it felt as if hands were colder than the sword itself. Not only was his hand cold, his heart was as well.

Famed reputation, powerful positions, even if he could give it all up now, he still could not get back all the energy he had just used up.

He was looking at XiMen ChuiXue, but he was think of Huo TianQing, he suddenly felt regret.

This was the first time that he really truly felt regret in his life, and it could possibly be the last time.

He suddenly really wanted to see Lu XiaoFeng, but he knew that Lu XiaoFeng would never show up at this moment.

He could only unsheath his sword.

Because he had no other choice at that moment.

Suddenly, there were clashes sword energy.

The wind grew even colder, so that when XiMen ChuiXue himself bleeds, the blood would be blown dry just the same....

Chapter 9 - A death too strange

The carriage was not huge, just big enough to carry four people. The horses that were pulling the carriage were very well trained, even though the carriage was traveling on a mud road, it was very stable. Ma XiuZheng and Shi XiuYun sat on one side with Sun XiuQing and Yie XiuZhu sitting opposite of them.

The carriage had been traveling for a long time, Shi XiuYun suddenly noticed that everyone was staring at her. She pretended not to notice, but at last could not help but pout her lips and challenge everyone.

"Why are you guys all staring at me? Did a flower suddenly sprout on my face?"

"Even if a flower did sprout on your face," Sun XiuQing laughed and replied, "it would have been picked just then."

Her eyes were big and her lips were thin, it was obvious to anyone she meets that she was the kind of girl who would never hold anything back when making fun of someone.

She did not let Shi XiuYun reply before continuing.

"The weird thing is, girl here always claims that any kind of flower would never be as good as a vegetable, so how come suddenly she says flower this and flower that as soon as she opens her mouth?"

Amazingly, Shi XiuYun did not blush, instead she casually replied:
"Nothing weird about that at all, it's because his surname is Hua, flower, so of course I'm going to say flower this and flower that."

"He?" Sun XiuQing laughed a little. "Who's he?"

"His surname is Hua, Hua ManLou."

"How do you already know his name?"

"He just told me."

"How come I didn't hear it?"

"We were talking about our stuff, why must we let you hear everything? Besides, you were probably thinking of Lu XiaoFeng at that moment anyways."

"I was thinking of Lu XiaoFeng?" Sun XiuQing almost screamed. "Who said I was thinking about him?"

"Me," Shi XiuYun answered. "While he was sitting in the bath tub, you couldn't take your eyes off of him, I noticed it the entire time, you can't deny that now."

Sun XiuQing was laughing and throwing a fit at the same time.

"Can you guys believe how crazy this girl is? Everything that comes out of her mouth is a lie." She scolded, with a smile on her face.

"That girl really is a bit crazy," Ma XiuZheng casually answered. "But your eyes was on Lu XiaoFeng the entire time."

"Thank you, Eldest Martial Sister, for being fair," Shi XiuYun laughed, waving her hands.

Sun XiuQing's eyes twirled around for a bit before she suddenly sighed.

"She was being fair, but there was a tinge of sourness in what she said."

"Sourness?" Now it's Ma XiuZheng's look up astonished. "What sourness?"

"A kind of sourness somewhat like vinegar."

"Are you saying that I'm eating vinegar, that I'm jealous of you?" Now Ma XiuZheng was starting to yell as well.

{Note: in everyday Chinese, the expression "chi cu", or "eating vinegar", is often used to describe that tinge of jealousy that one feels in matters of the heart are involved.}

"I didn't say it," Sun XiuQing replied. "You just said it yourself."

With much effort, she suppressed her laughter and continued, not letting others responde. "All these people say that Lu XiaoFeng is so smooth and so suave and so charming and so this and so that. But when I saw him today, sitting in the bath tub like that, he was just like a retard or something, nothing compared to that XiMen ChuiXue."

"What are you saying?" Shi XiuYun yelled in shock.

"What I'm saying, is that if I had to pick a man, I would definitely pick XiMen ChuiXue. Now there is a real man there, better than 10 Lu XiaoFeng's."

Shi XiuYun sighed.

"From here, it looks like you are the one that's crazy. Even if all the men in the world died, I would never pick that arrogant and conceited living corpse."

"You don't like it, I do. This is called 'cabbages and carrots, to each her own'."

Ma XiuZheng could not stop herself from laughing anymore.

"From the looks of you two, it seems like you guys have already partitioned out the cabbages and carrots."

"And the one we partition to you is that big carrot, Lu XiaoFeng!" Sun

XiuQing said, trying to hold back her laughter.

Shi XiuYun blinked.

"Then doesn't Third Sister Yie get nothing?"

Yie XiuZhu's face was already blushing furiously.

"Will you look at yourselves?" Yie XiuZhu said, still blushing. "You have only met them once and it looks like you girls are going mad thinking of them, it's not like you girls have never met other men in your lives before is it?"

"We have never met any men like them," Sun XiuQing sighed.

She shot a look at Yie XiuZhu out of the corner of her eye and continued.

"To be honest, any of the three men that we met today is pretty good, even though you won't admit it, you probably like all three of them don't you?"

"You... you must be crazy." Yie XiuZhu was so distraught that somehow her face got even redder.

"Number Two Sun over there always have this problem, and that is that she loves to bully honest people."

"Her? Honest?" Sun XiuQing pouted her lips. "She looks honest on the surface, but of us four, I guarantee that she'll be the first to marry."

"What... what makes you say that?" Yie XiuZhu asked.

"Because she knows that she won't be the first one to marry," Shi XiuYun jumped in before Sun XiuQing could answer. "Forget about men with four eyebrows, even men with four times his courage won't dare to marry her."

"That sounds about right," Ma XiuZheng concurred. "Anyone who marries a woman like her would surely be killed by a brain tumor from listening to her talk."

"Maybe if she finds a deaf then...." Shi XiuYun added, trying to hold back her laughter, and failing miserably.

Sun XiuQing had already stood up by now and was yelling: "Oh I see how it is, all three of you are ganging up against me. Well ok, I'll let you three have the three men, there, satisfied?"

"Let us have them?" Shi XiuYun replied. "Are these three men yours or something?"

"This girls knows a heck of alot," Ma XiuZheng sighed, "but she sure doesn't know any shame."

Sun XiuQing stared at them before suddenly shouting at the top of her lungs: "I'm starving!"

Ma XiuZheng stared at her in shock, as if she was looking at a truly insane person.

Sun XiuQing could not help but laugh at herself either.

"Whenever I get mad, I get hungry. Now that I'm mad, I have got to find a place to eat."

When four girls get together, it would almost impossible to get them not to talk about men. Just like if four men got together, to make them not talk about women would be equally impossible.

But Lu XiaoFeng and Hua ManLou were not discussing women, they were not in the mood. They were discussing XiMen ChuiXue.

"I only hope that he hasn't found DuGu YiHe yet." Lu XiaoFeng observed.

"You don't think he is a match for DuGu YiHe?" Hua ManLou asked.

"His sword techniques are quick and lethal, not one bit of compassion in them, just like the person that he is, it never leaves any choice for his foes."

Hua ManLou slowly nodded.

"If a man leaves no choices for his foes, it is the same as not leaving

himself any choices." He observed.

"That is why, once his sword is unsheathed, if it can't injure others, then he has consigned himself to death!"

"But he isn't dead."

"That's only because he hasn't met a foe like DuGu YiHe until now."

Lu XiaoFeng paused momentarily before continuing.

"DuGu's sword techniques carry behind them a nastiness, with great inner strength, devastating offensives and an even more devastating defense, add to that the fact that his experience in fighting is something that XiMen could not match. That's why if XiMen can't succeed by the 30th move, then he would undoubtedly die under DuGu's sword."

"And you think that there is no chance of him succeeding within 30 moves?"

"Nobody can take DuGu's life within 30 moves, that applies to XiMen ChuiXue as well!" Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

Hua ManLou was silent for a long time before letting out a sigh of his own.

"You were the one who asked him to get into this."

"And that is why I am hoping that he hasn't found DuGu yet."

They have already passed the quiet and peaceful road and made it to a little river just outside of the Pearl and Diamond Pavilion.

Under the bright and clear waxing moon, the water shimmered like a shattered piece of silver. A person stood by the river, clothing as white as the snow.

When Lu XiaoFeng saw him, he saw Lu XiaoFeng as well.

"I'm not dead yet." He suddenly said.

Lu XiaoFeng laughed.

"You really don't look much like a dead person."

"The one who died is DuGu YiHe." XiMen ChuiXue replied.

Lu XiaoFeng stopped laughing.

"You can't figure out why?"

Lu XiaoFeng admitted it, he did not want to.

But now XiMen ChuiXue let out a little laugh, a very strange and peculiar laugh. "I can't figure out why either." He said.

"Oh?"

"When Su ShaoYing made his 21 moves, I have already seen 3 openings."

"So you thought that you had at least 3 opportunities to kill DuGu YiHe?"

XiMen ChuiXue nodded.

"Usually, I only need one opportunity, but when I was fighting him, I could not grasp any one of the opportunities at all."

"Why?"

"Even though his techniques had openings, as soon as I start to make my move with my sword, he would immediately compensate for the openings. I have never met anyone who knows where the openings of his very own techniques are, but he knew."

"All the sword skills in the world have openings, but there really isn't that many who knows where the openings of his own sword skills are." Lu XiaoFeng agreed.

"I made my move 3 times, all three times they were fended off, by then I knew I couldn't kill him. If you couldn't kill with a sword technique that only kills, then it is you who are to die."

"Although you are conceited, at least you know your own weaknesses."
Lu XiaoFeng sighed. "That is why you are still alive!"

"I am still alive only because after 30 moves, his techniques suddenly turned chaotic."

"A master like him, if his techniques suddenly turn chaotic, there can only be two reasons."

XiMen ChuiXue waited for further explanation.

"If his heart and mind was in turmoil, then his sword techniques must as well."

"His heart and mind was not in turmoil."

"Could it be that his inner strength was running out?"

Without strength, sword techniques would turn chaotic as well.

"With his inner strength and skill, how could he have completely used up his inner strength after just 30 exchanges?" Lu XiaoFeng wondered.

"I said it myself, I can't figure out why either."

Lu XiaoFeng thought silently.

"Could it be that before he fought with you, someone else had made him use up a lot of his inner strength? Maybe someone had already fought with him before you?"

"He didn't say, so I wouldn't know," XiMen ChuiXue coldly replied. "Had I known, then I would not have forced him to fight."

"When you force other people to fight, when was the last time you gave your foes an opportunity to speak?" Lu XiaoFeng said with a pathetic smile.

Although there was no expression on XiMen ChuiXue's face, shades of shadow seemed to have crept into his eyes.

"He said something strange just before he died." He slowly said, after a long long silence.

"What did he say?"

"He said he...."

When the sword was pulled out, there was still blood on the blade.

When DuGu YiHe saw that the other person's sword had his blood on it, saw his blood being gently blown off drop by drop, there was no pain or anger or horror on his face. On the contrary, he suddenly shouted: "I understand now, I understand now...."

"He said he understood now!"

"What did he understand?" Lu XiaoFeng frowned.

The shades of shadows inside XiMen ChuiXue's eyes darkened even more as he actually let out a prolonged sigh.

"Maybe he understood that life is short, like the morning dew. Maybe he understood that the fame and power he gave up everything for, in the end was nothing...."

Lu XiaoFeng thought deeply.

"Precisely because life is short, you can't live it for nothing," he slowly said. "What did he really understand? Or is it didn't understand? What did he really want to say?"

XiMen ChuiXue stared at the horizon for a long time before suddenly uttering a very unexpected phrase of his own.

"I'm hungry."

"You are hungry?" Lu XiaoFeng looked at him in shock.

"I always get hungry after I kill," XiMen ChuiXue coldly replied.

This small little wine shop should have been closed by now, residing as it did on the outskirts of a thick and dense white mulberry grove.

There were several households inside the woods, there were also several households outside the woods, mostly small little families making a living raising silkworms.

This particular little house was somewhat close to the road, so they built a little small hut with windows on all four sides out in the front and bought some simple wine and food for the passerbys. When the Four Beauties of E'Mei found this place, the owner was just about to go to bed, but then again how could anyone refuse four beautiful girls like them?

Inside the little wineshop was just three tables, but they were kept very clean and neat. The little dishes made to go down with the wine were simple yet refreshing and the light tasting wine was just the flavor that the girls liked, so they were having a great time.

When girls are having a great time, they would always talk much more.

They were gossiping left and right, laughing, just like a group of happy little hens.

"That guy with the surname of Hua," Sun XiuQing suddenly observed, "he seemed to have a bit of a south-of-the-river accent, could he be from that Hua family?"

"Which Hua family?" Shi XiuYun asked.

"That Hua family from south-of-the-river. Rumors say that you could take a horse and gallop at full speed for an entire day and still be inside their land."

"I know about this family as well," Ma XiuZheng cut in. "But I don't think Hua ManLou is of that family."

"Why not?" Sun XiuQing asked.

"I heard that this family led the most extravagant of lives, and is very particular about what they drink, eat, and wear, even their staple man looked like a millionaire walking around about town. But that Hua ManLou looked like a very simple man. Not only that, I have never heard anything about one of their disciples being blind."

Shi XiuYun immediately snickered.

"What's the big deal about being blind? Even though he is blind, but he could see so much more than the four of us who have eyes could see put together."

Ma XiuZheng did not know if she should say this, so she changed gear a bit and smiled.

"His kungfu skills are really pretty good, even I didn't think that he could just casually catch your sword in between his fingers like that."

"That maybe because this little girl here was already smitten with him by then." Sun XiuQing joked.

Shi XiuYun shot her an angry look.

"If you feel up to it, you can give him a try next time if you want. I'm not bragging for him or anything, but there aren't that many in this world who could match that move of his."

"How about XiMen ChuiXue? Was that move of his shabby?" Sun XiuQing replied.

Shi XiuYun did not reply, because she could not but admit that move by XiMen ChuiXue was truly frightening.

"I heard that not only is XiMen ChuiXue's sword skills without peers, his family is quite well off as well, Thousand Plums Mansion's extravagance and wealth is definitely not any levels under the Huas." Ma XiuZheng chipped in.

Sun XiuQing's eyes shone.

"I like him, not because of his wealth or family, even if he was a penniless pauper, I would still like him."

"From head to toe, I really can't see a single attractive feature about him." Shi XiuYun casually observed.

"Why must be able to see his attractive points? As long as I...."

She suddenly stopped talking, her face suddenly flushed to a blood red, red to the very roots of her ears.

Because at this moment a man walked in from outside, clothing as white as the snow, none other than XiMen ChuiXue.

Shi XiuYun could not say anything more either, all four gossiping girls suddenly all stopped.

Not only did they see XiMen ChuiXue, but also Hua ManLou and Lu XiaoFeng.

With a pair of piercing eyes like daggers, XiMen ChuiXue stared at them. He suddenly walked up to them.

"Not only did I kill Su ShaoYing," he coldly announced, "but I also killed DuGu YiHe."

The colors on all four girls' faces changed, especially Sun XiuQing's face, which turned as white as a sheet, without the slightest trace of blood.

In a young girl's heart, hate is very easily replaced with the feeling of love. Besides, Su ShaoYing always was a little too conceited, thinking that his four martial sisters should all be fighting over him, hence he was not

well liked by any of them. But the killing of master was a completely different matter.

"What... what did you say?" Sun XiuQing had to ask again.

"I killed DuGu YiHe."

Shi XiuYun suddenly jumped up from her seat and began to shout.

"My Second Martial Sister likes you that much, how... how... how could you go and do something like that!"

Nobody could have expected her to say something like that, even XiMen ChuiXue seemed somewhat taken aback.

Sun XiuQing's face was alternately green and red. Suddenly, grinding her teeth together, the two swords inside of her sleeves shot out, the glow of the swords flashed as they fiercely flew towards XiMen ChuiXue's chest.

But XiMen ChuiXue did not responde, instead, he gently flicked his sleeves up and his body smoothly slid back, slid back two or three meters.

"I'm going to kill you!" Sun XiuQing shrieked, her eyes already a teary red.

Twirling her swords around, jaws clenched, she dove towards XiMen

ChuiXue. The moves of her weapons were based upon quickness and sudden changes, the flashes of swords blinds one's eyes as if they were water droplets from a huge splash as she, in a blink of an eye, attacked 7 times.

Her sisters' swords were also out.

"This is a matter between us and XiMen ChuiXue, other people better not interfere." Shi XiuYun loudly declared.

She obviously meant that for Hua ManLou. In reality, Hua ManLou could not interfere even if he wanted to.

But how could he just stand there and let these four innocent girls die under the sword of XiMen ChuiXue?

At this precise moment, a long "bang" could be heard as XiMen ChuiXue suddenly reached out and flicked Sun XiuQing's wrist, hitting the sword in her left hand into the one in her right hand.

When the two swords met, she felt her wrist temporarily go numb, before she knew it, the two swords were suddenly in XiMen ChuiXue's hands.

"Stand back, or else I will unsheath my sword!" XiMen ChuiXue coldly ordered.

His voice was cold, but his eyes were not, that was why Sun XiuQing was still alive.

He was still human, still a man, how could he bring himself to kill a beautiful girl with feelings towards himself.

Sun XiuQing's face was even whiter as her eyes filled with tears.

"I already said I'm going to kill you, if I can't kill you, then... then I will die in front of you!" She said, still clenching her jaw.

"Dying won't do a thing, if you want revenge, then go back and get everybody from all 108 buildings of Green Shirt Pavilion." XiMen ChuiXue coldly sneered.

Sun XiuQing looked surprised and caught completely off guard.

"What did you say?" She uttered.

"Since DuGu YiHe is the Helmsman of the Green Shirt Pavilion, then...."

Sun XiuQing did not let him finish.

"You say my master is a member of the Green Shirt Pavilion? Are you crazy?" She demanded, with fury in her voice and her eyes. "This entire trip here happened because my master received some information that the First Pavilion of the Green Shirt Pavilion is at...."

Suddenly, a "twang" came from outside the back window as a flash of black streak came shooting through the window and hit Sun XiuQing in

the back.

Sun XiuQing's body twitched quickly and fell towards XiMen ChuiXue.

Shi XiuYun was the closest to the back window. With an angry shout, she turned around and dove towards the window. But at that precise moment, another black streak came flashing through the window at her with such ferocity and speed that she could not get out of the way.

She screamed, the swords in her hand flew out, but her body fell.

By now, Sun XiuQing had fallen into XiMen ChuiXue's arms. Suddenly, XiMen ChuiXue grabbed her around the waist with one hand and unsheathed his sword with the other; with a flash of the sword, his body literally became one with the sword flash and flew out of the window.

Lu XiaoFeng, on the other hand, had long jumped out using another window. Ma XiuZheng and Yie XiuZhu shouted in anger and came chasing out as well.

In the middle of the night, the night wind breezed through the little garden outside the windows, not a trace of human shade could be seen.

Beyond the mulberry grove, there came the sounds of hounds howling. The flashes of XiMen ChuiXue had entered the grove.

Without any regards toward their own safety, Ma XiuZheng and Yie XiuZhu ran in as well.

The families that lived inside the woods had already gone to sleep, there was no light to be seen, not even the flash of XiMen ChuiXue's sword.

"Let's go!" Ma XiuZheng said. "No matter what, we have to get her back!"

Before she even finished, the two of them disappeared.

A yellow dog ran howling towards a small road in the back of the grove.

Lu XiaoFeng had stopped chasing, he suddenly stopped underneath a tree, bent over, and pick something up....

The owner of the wine shop was curled up in the corner, not a trace of blood was left on his face.

Hua ManLou bent over and, gently as he could, brought Shi XiuYun up in his arms. Her heart was still beating, but beating very weakly.

A deathly gray color had frighteningly appeared on her beautiful face. Slowly, her eyes opened and stared at Hua ManLou.

"Why... why haven't you left." She lightly said.

"I'm not leaving," Hua ManLou gently replied. "I'm staying here with you."

A strange expression appeared in Shi XiuYun's eyes, seemingly comfort, also seemingly sadness.

"I didn't think you would still recognize me." She said, barely able to sum up enough strength to smile.

"I will always recognize you."

Shi XiuYun smiled again, a sad and lonely smile.

"Even though I didn't become a mute, I'm about to die. Dead people can't talk either can they?"

"You... you won't die, I'm sure of it."

"You don't need to comfort me, I know. I'm hit by poison needles."

"Poison?" Hua ManLou's expression changed noticeably.

"Because I feel as if my entire body is numb, that's probably the poison acting up, why don't you... you feel my wound, it's probably very hot."

She suddenly grabbed Hua ManLou's hand and placed it on her wound.

Her wound was right over her heart, her chest was soft, smooth, and warm. As she pressed Hua ManLou's ice cold hands onto her soft chest,

her heart suddenly started beating much faster.

Hua ManLou's heart was beating as well. At this moment, he heard Lu XiaoFeng's voice from outside the window.

"What was she hit with?"

"Poison needles."

A long silence.

"You stay there with her, I'm going to go find a person."

By the time Lu XiaoFeng finished his sentence, his voice seemed to be coming from very far away.

"You really haven't gone," Shi XiuYun said, trying to breath. "You are really here with me!"

"Close your eyes, let me... suck the poison needles out."

Shi XiuYun's deathily white face gained a hint of red as her eyes glowed in the dark.

"You are really willing to do that?"

"As long as you are willing...." Hua ManLou seriously replied.

"I'm willing to do whatever, but I don't want to close my eyes, because I want to see your face."

Her voice got weaker and weaker, until at the end the smile on her face suddenly froze and that glow in her eyes suddenly disappeared.

Death. Suddenly and silently it had stolen her from inside Hua ManLou's arms.

But her eyes seemed as if they were still staring at Hua ManLou, staring at him forever...

Darkness. But all that was in front of Hua ManLou's eyes was darkness.

He suddenly hated himself for being blind, hated himself for even being able to look at her one final time.

She was so young, but her vivacious and young body had suddenly turned cold and stiff.

Gently, Hua ManLou removed his hand, tears had already started to flow down from inside his eyes.

He did not leave, nor did he move. For the first time, he felt the harshness and cruelty of life.

Wind blew in from the windows, wind blew in from the door, the warm

April wind felt to him like the bitter cold winds of Winter.

He suddenly discovered that the wind carried with it wave of wave of a flowery fragrance. Suddenly the back window crackled. He snapped his head around and was prepared to jump up.

But instead a sweet and warm voice came from outside the window

"Don't be frightened, it's me!" the voice gently said to him.

This voice was just the one that he was familiar with, this person, also was just the one that he had been thinking about the entire time.

"FeiYan?" He could not help but utter in a slight shout despite of himself.

"Yes, it's me. Didn't think you could still recognize my voice."

A person lightly floated in from the back window, her voice carried with it a tinge of jealousy and envy.

"I thought that you had forgotten all about me." She coolly said.

Hua ManLou stood there, as if he was dumbstruck, only after a long time did he recover from the surprise.

"How... how did you suddenly get here?"

"Are you saying that I shouldn't have come?"

"No, it's just that I didn't expect it," Hua ManLou shook his head and sighed. "I thought you were already...."

"Did you think I was already dead?"

Hua ManLou was at a lost as to what to say.

ShangGuan FeiYan coolly sighed again.

"If I'm to die, then I would have to die like her, in your arms."

She slowly walked up to just in front of Hua ManLou.

"I was watching you two earlier, I... I felt terrible, if it wasn't for the fact that she's dead, I might have killed her."

Hua ManLou was silent.

"I heard you sing once." He suddenly said after a long time.

"Was it outside of Thousand Plums Mansion, from inside an abandoned shrine?" She enquired in a heavy voice.

"Mmm."

This time it was ShangGuan FeiYan who was quiet.

"But by the time you found the place, I had already left." She quietly said.

"Why did you leave?"

Her voice got even quieter.

"You should know better than anyone that I didn't want to leave."

"Someone forced you to leave?"

"I was forced to sing that song as well, I didn't know why at the time, but then I realized that they wanted to lure you to that shrine."

"They? Who are they?"

ShangGuan FeiYan did not answer this question, but her voice suddenly began to shake, as if she was frightened.

"Did you already fall into their hands?"

"It's best if you don't know too much, or else... else...." Her voice was shaking badly.

"Or else what?" Hua ManLou could not help but ask.

ShangGuan FeiYan was quiet for a long time again.

"They lured you there to warn you about interfering in this matter, they wanted you tell you that I had already fallen into their hands." She did not let Hua ManLou interrupt her and continued. "The reason why they wanted me to come here today was also to talk you out of interfering with this matter again. Else... else they would make me kill you!"

"They want you to come and kill me?" Hua ManLou was startled.

"Yes, because they know that you would never expect me to harm you and would never guard against me. But they didn't realize that I could never bring myself to harm you in anyway."

She suddenly lounged forward and put her arms tightly around Hua ManLou.

"By now you probably realize who they are," she said in a shaky voice. "But you could never imagine just how frightening powerful they really are...."

Yan TieShan and DuGu YiHe were both dead, the only person who could want to stop this was Huo Xiu.

"No matter how frightening their power is, you don't need to be

afraid...." Hua ManLou said in a heavy voice.

"But I really am scared, not for myself, but for you. If it wasn't for me, you guys would not have been dragged into this, if something should happen to you, how could I go on living like that?"

She was holding on to him as tight as she could, but her body was still shaking. Her breath carried with it a sweet and tender fragrance.

Hua ManLou held his arm out and wanted to hold her tight too.

But at his side still laid the body of Shi XiuYun, a young girl filled with such passion and love, who had just died within these two arms of his, how could he possibly use those same two arms to hold another?

His heart was filled with pain and conflict, he wanted to control his own emotions and feelings, but just could not.

When his thoughts returned to holding her, however, she suddenly pushed away.

"You probably understand what I'm saying now."

"No, I don't understand."

"No matter if you understand or not, I... I have to leave now."

"Leave?" Hua ManLou could not help but sound desperate. "Why must you leave?"

"I don't want to go either, but I must!" Her voice filled with sadness and apprehension. "If you have any feelings for me in you, then please don't ask me why anymore, or drag my hands, else not only will you harm yourself, but me as well!"

"But I... I...."

"Let me go, as long as I know that you are alive and well, I'll be happy and satisfied. Even if you are to wrong me...."

Her voice was more and more distance, and suddenly vanished. Darkness. Hua ManLou suddenly found himself trapped inside a boundless darkness and loneliness. I knew that there must be circumstances beyond her control that forced her to leave.

But all he could do was stand here like an idiot, he could not help her, he could not free her from her troubles, he could not even comfort her, just like a little before when all he could do was let Shi XiuYun die in his arms.

"What kind of a man am I? What am I?" There seemed to be a voice laughing at him by his side. "You are nothing but a blind man, a useless blind man!"

A blind man's life, is supposed to be filled with darkness, a hopeless darkness.

His fists were clenched as he stood in the April night breeze. He suddenly discovered that life was not as perfect as he had imagined it to be. Life was filled with many unavoidable sorrow and pain.

He did not know of any way to escape it all.

April was supposed to be the season when swallows returned home, but his little swallow had just flown away, flown away like the best years of our lives, never to return. He slowly walked onto the grass outside the door, they were already dripping wet from the dew.

Chapter 10 - Broken Souls, Heaven's Wrath

The soft grass had been soaked through by dew, the night was getting deeper.

Huo TianQing slowly made his way through the yard. The distant light in a small building shined onto his white and withered face. He looked very tired, lonely and tired.

The clear water in the lotus pond was quiet like a mirror, reflecting the moon and a sky full of stars. With his hands behind him, he stood silently at the head of the small bridge. When the wind blew by, a small leaf was brought with it onto the ground.

He bent down and picked this fallen leaf up.

"You are here." He suddenly said.

"I'm here."

When Huo TianQing looked up, he saw Lu XiaoFeng.

Just like the fallen leaf, Lu XiaoFeng floated in from outside the wall and landed on the other side of the lotus pond. He was also staring at Huo TianQing.

Between them, there was about 20 meters of lotus pond, but at the moment they both felt as if the distance between them were too close for comfort.

Lu XiaoFeng smiled.

"You seemed to be waiting for me!" He said.

"I was waiting for you."

"You knew I was going to come?"

Huo TianQing nodded.

"I knew you had to come."

"Why?"

"Since you left, a lot of things happened here."

"A lot of things?"

"You didn't know?"

"I only know one thing."

"You know that DuGu YiHe died here?"

Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"But I don't know if he really should have died."

Huo TianQing was silent.

"Of course, you wouldn't know that I had something to do with his death." He suddenly sighed as well.

"Oh!"

"If not for me, then he might have died to XiMen ChuiXue's sword."

"Oh?"

"I never liked arrogant people who thought so highly of themselves, but DuGu just happened to be one of those arrogant people who thought so highly of himself. So before XiMen ChuiXue arrived, I exchanged blows with him."

"I knew."

"You knew?" This surprised Huo TianQing. "How did you know?"

Lu XiaoFeng laughed a bit.

"When DuGu fought XiMen, he had, at most, half of his inner strength left. Of the people who are able to make him use half of his inner strength, there aren't many of them around here."

Huo TianQing nodded.

"Correct. This was something that you would have been able to figure out."

"So there is something that I wouldn't have been able to figure out?"

Huo TianQing nodded.

Lu XiaoFeng cracked another smile.

"No matter, right now I just want to know where ShangGuan DanFeng is."

"This is just the thing that I wouldn't have been able to figure out."

"What is?"

"She didn't come here, and perhaps won't come here ever again!"

Lu XiaoFeng was speechless, he really did not even consider the possibility that ShangGuan DanFeng was not here.

"Maybe you are wondering, how did I come to know she won't come."

"I really am wondering just that." Lu XiaoFeng admitted.

"Once you read this letter, then you probably won't be wondering."

He suddenly took out a letter from inside his sleeve and flicked his hand. The letter, like a piece of cloud, gently floated to Lu XiaoFeng.

"DanFeng in danger,

"XiaoFeng please stop,

"If not stop,

"Life not last."

There were only those 12 words on the letter, the words were very neatly written, and the paper was very fine as well.

On the envelope was written: "To: Lu XiaoFeng".

"This letter was for you, now I hand it over to you." Huo TianQing said.

"But I don't understand what it means."

"It means that it is very difficult for you to find ShangGuan DanFeng at this moment, so it's best if you stop right now and not meddle in this business any longer, or else someone will want you killed." Huo TianQing

casually replied, of course, he realized that Lu XiaoFeng understood all of this.

"So who wanted you to give his letter to me?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"If you were to write a letter like that for me to give to another, would you give it to me in person?"

"No."

"That's why the person who wrote this letter did not give me the letter in person either. I only found this letter on Boss Yan's shrine, other than that, I don't know."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"Of course not."

"But you should know."

"What I should know?"

"You should know who wrote this letter."

"I only know that Boss Yan did not write this inside his coffin." Lu XiaoFeng said with a pitiful smile.

"You should also know, other than Boss Yan, who else does not want you to meddle in this business." Huo TianQing's eyes brightened.

"Pity I don't know that either." Lu XiaoFeng sighed again.

"You know at least of one."

"Who?"

"Me."

Lu XiaoFeng laughed.

But Huo TianQing did not.

"If ShangGuan DanFeng don't come, and you stop what you are doing, then this Pearl and Diamond Pavilion and all its treasures would all belong to me!" Huo TianQing said with a darkened face.

"But I know that the head of the Heaven Hunter Sect would never do something like that." Lu XiaoFeng smiled.

Huo TianQing stared at him, the corner of his mouth finally curled up in

the slightest hint of a smile.

"What something to drink?" He suddenly said.

"Of course!"

The wine was kept in blue and white porcelin, when poured out, it was colorless and had no smell, just as if it was water, but as soon as it was stirred with another wine, the fragrance of the wine immediately filled this small yet delicate room.

Lu XiaoFeng slowly took a sip, then let out a long sigh.

"Now that is the genuine Virgin's Blush."

"You know your wine."

"That's why, next time you have wine as good as this, you should invite me over, at least I won't let this good wine of yours go to waste."

"I don't usually have wine this good you know." Huo TianQing laughed and replied.

"Oh."

"I got this wine the last time I went and visited our neighbor, he gave it to me."

"I envy you," Lu XiaoFeng sighed. "Finding a neighbor as good as that is harder than finding a good jug of wine nowadays."

"But he is a weird fellow, you probably heard of him before."

"I do know quite a number of weird fellows, which one could he be?"

"His name is Huo Xiu."

"Huo Xiu?" Lu XiaoFeng almost shouted. "How could he be your neighbor?"

"He doesn't come here very often, but he did build this small little place on the mountain in the back and would stay here a couple of months every year."

Lu XiaoFeng's eyes suddenly started to glow.

"Do you know why he would come here?"

"Other than drinking? He doesn't seem to do much of anything."

Lu XiaoFeng did not inquire any further, he seemed to be deep in thought. He had made a rule of not thinking too much while drinking, but this time he made an exception.

Huo TianQing did not pay much attention to Lu XiaoFeng and continued. "Any good wine that you can name, he probably has it in that place. Even I, who don't care much for drinking, don't quite want to leave that little place once I enter it."

"You know what kind of wine taste especially good?" Lu XiaoFeng suddenly said.

"No, what kind?"

"Stolen wine."

Huo TianQing laughed.

"You want me to go and steal some wine with you?"

"Exactly!" Lu XiaoFeng laughed.

"There is only one type of person in the world that can't drink a drop of wine, do you know what kind that is?"

"No, what kind?"

"The ones who have lost their head, so if you want to keep that head of yours for drinking wine, then you better forget this idea."

"Stealing wine is like stealing books," Lu XiaoFeng joked, "they are done

both highly civilized and tasteful thieves. Even if you are caught by someone, you probably won't get your head chopped off."

"Well that depends on what kind of a person catches you!"

"Come on, if you go back 500 years, you and Huo Xiu were of the same family," Lu XiaoFeng carried on joking. "What are you afraid of?"

"He told me himself, inside that little place of his, there are 108 different types of traps just waiting to be sprung. If you are an uninvited guest and just charge up in there, then no matter who you are, it is very difficult to come back out alive." He stopped to sigh before continuing. "Those traps don't know who you are, they don't care if your surname is Huo, or Lu, it doesn't make a difference to them."

Lu XiaoFeng finally let out a sigh as well.

"I had four eye brows, it's not a big deal if I lose two of them, but I only have one head, I can't even make it if only half of it is gone." He said with a hopeless smile. "For just a couple of jugs of wine, he uses 108 different traps to guard against thieves, no wonder he's rich."

"Maybe he's not just guarding the wines."

"So you think there are other secrets inside that little building of his?" Lu XiaoFeng's eyes were glowing again.

Huo TianQing smiled.

"Everyone, more or less, have some secrets...." He casually replied.

"But there is only one kind of person who can really keep a secret."

"What kind?"

"The dead kind."

"But Huo Xiu is not dead." Huo TianQing's eyes were glowing as well.

"No, he isn't."

The most frightening kind is dead kind too. No matter how warm, gentle, or beautiful that person was while alive, death would always make that person frightening.

That was why Shi XiuYun's body was covered by a white sheet of cloth.

There was a lone lamp sitting on the table, Hua ManLou sat silently by the light, unmoving. He had left, but came back.

No matter if Shi XiuYun was dead or alive, he could not leave her here by herself.

The owner of this little shop ran off a long time ago, leaving only a single lamp here, seemingly forgotten that a blind man had no use for light.

The night was quiet, without the slightest bit of sound, when Lu XiaoFeng entered, there was still no sound.

But Hua ManLou still turned his head around towards him.

"You've been drinking?" He suddenly asked.

"A bit," Lu XiaoFeng admitted.

"After all that's happened, you were still in the mood to drink?" He coldly said. "That is indeed rare."

He stiffened his face, very rarely did he ever stiffen up his face.

Lu XiaoFeng blinked.

"You are jealous of me aren't you?"

He had a secret weapon against anyone mad at him --- since you are already mad, then why not make you even madder? Let's see just how mad you can get, let's see if you can die from anger.

Hua ManLou did not reply, he knew Lu XiaoFeng through and through,

he did not want to die of anger just yet.

Now it was Lu XiaoFeng's turn to not know what to do.

"Actually, you should be drinking too," Lu XiaoFeng awkwardly stated.
"The best thing about alcohol is that it can make you stop thinking about a lot of stuff that you can't do anything about."

Hua ManLou ignored him for a long time.

"I ran into someone earlier." He suddenly broke the silence.

"You ran into quite a number of people earlier."

"But this person I absolutely did not expect to see here!"

"Who?"

"ShangGuan FeiYan."

Lu XiaoFeng was just as shocked as Hua ManLou was.

"She isn't dead?"

"Even though she's not dead, living is pretty close to death to her right about now." Hua ManLou sadly commented.

"Why?"

"She seemed to have fallen into other people's hands, her actions completely under their control."

"Do you know who is controlling her?" Lu XiaoFeng asked in a surprised face.

"She didn't say, and I don't know. But my guess is that this person must be...."

"Must be who?"

"Huo Xiu!"

Lu XiaoFeng had just sat down, now he shot back up.

"Huo Xiu?"

"ShangGuan FeiYan came here because she was forced to come here, to try and talk me out of this whole affair, right now there is only one person who wouldn't want us to continue, and that is Huo Xiu."

Lu XiaoFeng sat back down.

Another long silence passed.

"I didn't ran into someone earlier." He suddenly said.

That sentence was very intriguing and clever, almost impossible to decipher.

"You also didn't ran into quite a number of people earlier!"

"But this was a person that I was absolutely sure of running into, I went to Pearl and Diamond Pavilion specifically to try and find this person."

"ShangGuan DanFeng?"

"Correct!"

"Where is she now?"

"She didn't go there to begin with, but someone leave a letter to Huo TianQing, telling him to give to me!"

"What was on the letter?"

"Four phrases that somewhat made sense and somewhat didn't. Altogether not unlike a couple of farts."

"What were they?"

"DanFeng in danger, XiaoFeng please stop, if not stop, life not last!"

"It seemed that those phrases are telling you to stop this whole affair as well." Hua ManLou commented seriously.

"Right now, there is still only one person who could not want us to keep going."

"So you think that the person who wrote that letter is Huo Xiu as well?"

"I only know that whoever wrote this letter is not the kind of person who does anything half way."

A successful person would never do anything half way.

"SiKong ZhaiXing did not steal away ShangGuan DanFeng, maybe that didn't surprise him. Therefore he had instructed people to wait for her on the road and was finally able to get his hands on her."

"But I just finished drinking half a jug of his wine."

This surprised Hua ManLou quite a bit.

"You already met him?"

"No, the wine was his gift to Huo TianQing, he owns a small little pavilion on the mountain behind Pearl and Diamond Pavilion."

"A small pavilion?" Hua ManLou's expression noticeably changed.

One word at a time, Lu XiaoFeng replied.

"Yes, a small pavilion."

Hua ManLou stood up too, but he sat right back down.

Another long silence.

"Do you remember what Sun XiuQing was saying earlier?" He slowly said.

Of course Lu XiaoFeng remembers --- DuGu YiHe came here because he had received some information that the First Mansion of the Green Cloth Mansion is at....

Hua ManLou's face seemed to be glowing.

"Do you think that Huo Xiu's little pavilion is the First Mansion of Green Cloth Mansion?"

Lu XiaoFeng did not answer this question, this was a question that did not need to be answered anymore.

"But, according to the Golden Roc Emperor, the leader of the Green

Cloth Mansion is DuGu YiHe!" Hua ManLou pondered.

"His information might not be absolutely correct."

"Nobody can avoid being falsely accused by someone, and just the same nobody can ever avoid falsely accusing someone else." Hua ManLou concurred.

"It's a shame that Zhu Ting isn't here." Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"How come?"

"I heard that inside that little pavilion is 108 different booby traps."

"You want to go and check that place out?"

"Very much so."

"Are those traps keeping you from doing so?"

"Nope."

Once Lu XiaoFeng started doing something, he would never stop half way. Nothing could make him stop half way!

The hill was not very tall, but the view was very pretty. After a bit of a walk onto the hill, one could see a small light, a small light always looks very bright in the dark.

But in front of Hua ManLou was nothing but darkness.

"I see the building now." Lu XiaoFeng told him.

"Where?"

"Up ahead just through those woods right there, there is light inside the pavilion as well."

"Do you think Huo Xiu would be here too?"

"Don't know."

"I said a bit ago, nobody can ever avoid falsely accusing someone else."

"I heard you, I'm not deaf you know."

"I'm only reminding you, Huo Xiu is your friend, and has always been good to you."

"You think I might be falsely suspecting him?" Lu XiaoFeng coldly replied. "Even though I'm constantly being falsely accused of things by

others, I still haven't falsely accused anyone of anything yet."

He suddenly seemed to have turned very short tempered, because there was conflict in his heart.

To be able to finish this matter quickly and get to the bottom of all of this would be for the best, but he really did not want to find out that the evil and despicable leader of the Green Cloth Mansion was really his friend Huo Xiu.

Inside the woods was the refreshing and clean smell of early spring, even though the coldness in the wind was even more prevalent, the world seemed to be at peace.

No humans, no sounds, as if all the noise and troubles of life was relegated to below the hill.

However, some of the most dangerous and frightening things are often hidden inside this kind of peacefulness.

"I don't like this situation." Lu XiaoFeng suddenly said.

"What situation?"

"It's too quiet here, I get nervous when it's too quiet or too noisy."

"Why?"

"Because everytime I ran into something weird, it was under one of these two circumstances!"

"If you are really nervous, then it's best that you talk a bit more, talking usually gets people to forget about nervousness."

"What do you want me to talk about?"

"Talk about Huo Xiu."

"Don't you already know quite a bit about him?"

"I only know that he's a very strange and rich loner, he hates to socialize or deal with people, so even his most trusted servants do not know where he is."

"Not only does he hate to deal with people, he don't like women very much either, therefore he has stay a bachelor all the way to now."

"But a man must have some kind of a hobby or weakness."

"His only hobby is good wine, not only does he love to drink them, he also loves to collect all kinds of good wine, any kind of good wine, from everywhere."

"I heard that his martial arts is pretty good too."

"I have never really seen him use his kungfu, but I can guarantee that his lightness skills, his inner strength, and his pressure point hitting techniques are definitely not below that of anybody in the world."

"Oh?"

"And he practices a kind of virgin inner strength, to my knowledge, in this world, there are at most 10 men who are really dedicated enough to really train that."

"To practice that kind of martial arts, you really do have to sacrifice a lot." Hua ManLou laughed. "If not for the fact that he naturally don't like woman, it is very difficult to maintain that drive."

Lu XiaoFeng laughed too.

"I don't know about other people, but I would never practice that kind of martial arts, I'd rather have my head cut off than to practice that."

"If something else of yours is cut off, then you would have to practice it." Hua ManLou joked with a smile.

"So it turns out you are not a gentleman after all." Lu XiaoFeng burst out laughing.

"With a person like you around for any amount of time, any real gentleman would turn bad as well."

They laughed out loud, as if not caring if they were discovered or not --
- since sooner or later they were bound to be found out, then what's the point of being sneaky and lose some of that smoothness?

"According to legend, as long as you are dedicated enough to practice this kind of martial arts, your kungfu would undoubtedly be among the greats." Lu XiaoFeng continued.

"It's not legend, it's fact. If you are willing to master that, then when learning other kungfu skills you would only have to put in half the effort and get back several times the results in return."

"But since the dawn of time until now, of all the true martial art greats, none of them practiced this kungfu, do you know why?"

"Don't know."

"That's because those people who practice this kungfu are all old bachelors, and all old bachelors must have small problems here and there inside of their heart, those with problems inside their heart could never be a great in martial arts."

"And that's why you don't practice it." Hua ManLou smiled.

"Absolutely, positively no. No matter what you cut off of me, I won't practice it."

"The pity is that even if you do practice it, you would still not be able to be a great in martial arts."

"How come?"

"Because of the things that are detrimental to practicing kungfu, you seemed to love them more than life itself, things like...."

"Things like gambling, drinking, meddling in other people's affairs."

"And another very important one, you like women way too much."

Lu XiaoFeng burst out into another loud laugh. Only after he recovered did he realize that they had already made it through the woods and to the pavilion.

If it had been anyone else walking through that piece of road, they would have been scared and unsure of themselves every step, but they had leisurely made their way through it.

The road is all the same, what really matters is how you make your way through it. The road of life is the same as well.

The red lacquered door was closed, but on it was a huge word.

"PUSH"!

So Lu XiaoFeng pushed, and the door opened with just a push.

No matter what kind of door, it could be opened by pushing, all that mattered was whether or not you were willing to push, whether or not you dared to push.

Passed the door was a wide but crooked hall way, after going down the hall way a bit, the corners of the wall where forks appeared had several large words on them.

"TURN".

So Lu XiaoFeng turned, after several turns, he made it to a rather large stone platform, facing him was another large word.

"STOP".

So Lu XiaoFeng stopped, Hua ManLou, of course, stopped as well.

"Why did you suddenly stop?" He could not help but ask.

"Because there's a word here that says stop."

"It told you to stop, so you did?"

"So what if I didn't? There are 108 traps all around this place, do you know where any of them are?"

"Don't know, not even a single one."

Lu XiaoFeng laughed.

"So since we don't know, then what's the harm in being a little easy going?"

"Since if we keep going forward we might spring a trap, what's the harm in stopping?"

"Right, so if they tell me to stop, then I'm going to stop, they want me to walk, then I'm going to walk."

"It's rare to find someone as obedient as you." Hua ManLou sighed.

"Since I'm so obedient, how could they bring themselves to trouble me huh?"

Hua ManLou could not stop himself from laughing.

"No matter what you do, you always seem to have your own little strange and completely nonsensical way, but I could never tell if your way of doing things is right or wrong."

Before Lu XiaoFeng could reply, he suddenly realized that the stone platform they were standing on was slowly sinking.

Then he found that they were inside a stone room in the shape of a hexagon, a stone table was in the middle with two bowls of wine on it.

There was also a word on the table.

"DRINK".

Lu XiaoFeng laughed.

"See, benefits of listening to others."

"What benefits? Invite you to a drink?"

"Correct, this time they invite us for a drink, next time they might offer us some food."

"That is some genuine Music of Lu Prefecture, looks like Boss Huo is bringing out the good wine."

"But you don't use your nose to drink," Lu XiaoFeng joked. "Come on, a bowl for you, a bowl for me."

"This wine is too strong, one bowl and I'll probably be drunk."

"Alright, you don't drink, I will."

He brought the bowl up to his face and drank almost all of it in one go. Suddenly he noticed that the color on Hua ManLou's face had changed. So he had to stop.

"Are you alright?"

"This room seem to have a special fragrance, can you smell it?" Even Hua ManLou's lips had turned white.

"I only smell the wine."

Hua ManLou seemed to be barely able to stand, suddenly, he reached out, grabbed the bowl of wine, and drank it all in one gulp. Colors of life immediately returned to that already deathly gray colored face of his.

Lu XiaoFeng blinked a couple of times.

"Turns out this wine could also cure illnesses." He laughed.

He finished his own bowl of wine before discovering that, on the bottom of the bowl, there was another word.

"SMASH"!

So he threw the bowl onto the ground, smashing it to pieces on the stone wall.

Then he suddenly noticed that the stone wall was moving, uncovering a secret door. Behind the door was several scores of steps, leading into the ground.

Underneath was the belly of the mountain, Lu XiaoFeng did not even need to go down before seeing the glow of treasures.

The belly of the mountain was hollow, the inside was over 100 meters long and wide, piled high with uncountable numbers of spears and sabres, as well as chests after chests of gold and precious stones.

In his entire life, Lu XiaoFeng had never seen this much weapons or gold.

But what shocked him the most, was not the weapons nor the riches, but four men. Four old men.

Their faces were all wrinkled and white, obviously having not been under the sun for years, they were all wearing gold colored robes decorated with dragons and made from the finest of silks, all wearing jade covered belts, the clothing of emperors.

There were four golden chairs decorated with dragons, thrones. One of them was sitting on one, entranced, another one was crouched on the floor with an abacus, mumbling something to himself, as if he was counting the treasure, another one was standing in front of a bronze mirror, counting the white hairs on his head.

The last old man both hands behind his back and was pacing back and forth. When he saw Lu XiaoFeng, he immediately came walking up with a stiff face.

"Who art thou?" He demanded in a force tone. "How dare thou enter

your Emperor's bed chambers without being summoned. Doth thou not know this is an offense punishable by death by a thousand cuts?"

His attitude and demeanor really did look like that of an emperor, not a bit like he was joking.

Lu XiaoFeng was a bit taken aback.

"You say that this is the Royal Palace? Then who are you?" He had to ask.

"The Golden Roc Emperor, the 13th Emperor of the Golden Roc Empire."

Lu XiaoFeng was taken aback again. He never could have imagined that there was another Golden Roc Emperor here. But it turned out that there was more than one here.

This old man had just finished speaking before the other 3 old men came charging up.

"Don't believe this crazy old fool's words, I am the real Golden Roc Emperor, he's a fake." They were all saying.

"He's a fake... all three of them are fakes!"

The four old men were all saying the same thing, all arguing until their faces were red all the way to their ears. All that royal air and attitude that was there a moment ago had all but disappeared.

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly felt that all four of the men were insane, at least a bit crazy at least.

When running into this kind of people, the best thing to do is to high tail it out of there, even if you had promised to give him all of the treasures in the world, he would not have wanted to stay there one moment longer than he had to.

But just as he decided that he wanted to back out, he discovered that the door above the stone staircase was closed. The four old men had surrounded him as well.

"Who among us do you think is the real Golden Roc Emperor... be honest now, tell the truth." They all asked him.

On those old and worn faces of theirs, a crazy and animalistic look suddenly appeared. Lu XiaoFeng knew no matter who he picked as the real one, the other three would undoubtedly immediately try to kill him.

He had never encounter anything so comical, so frightening before in his life. He could not even have dreamed of this.

At this moment, he suddenly heard three clear and crisp rings as another door suddenly appeared on the wall behind him.

Four handsome, eunuch looking young men, each wearing yellow robes, came walking out, each with a small lacquered table with food on them in their hands.

The four old men immediately ran back and climbed onto their individual "thrones", changing their facial expression to a very serious and proud look. The four young men each knelt in front of one of the old men, presented the table to the old men, and said: "For Your Excellency's use."

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly came down with a big case of the head ache. Because he could not, for the life of him, figure out what is going on.

Could the four old men all be the real Golden Roc Emperor? How else could they all have eunuchs serving them?

But this was supposed to be Huo Xiu's little summer house, why would there be four men like these here?

That door on the other side of the wall was still open, so he quietly and surreptitiously, pulling Hua ManLou with him, walked through that door.

There was another hall way beyond the door, at the end of the hall way was another door, when they opened that door, they saw Huo Xiu.

Huo Xiu had on him some greenish-blue colored clothing that had already been washed to white, he wore a pair of old and torn shoes, and was sitting on the ground, using a broken piece of spoon, stirring the wine that was being kept warm by a small red clay stove.

Such delicious smelling wine.

Chapter 11 - The smartest man

The air was filled with the delicious and intoxicating aroma of the wine, the fire inside the little red clay stove was not big, but it was just enough to heat up the bitterly cold cave to a warm comfort.

"Well, at least I came to the right place," Lu XiaoFeng sighed. "And just at the right time."

Huo Xiu sighed as well.

"I don't get it, how come this person always show up just when I'm about to have some good wine."

He smiled and turned towards them. His bright and vivacious eyes gave even those wretched cloths on him life.

"If you aren't afraid of getting a little dirt on your cloth, then why don't you sit down and have a drink with me?" He asked with a smile.

Lu XiaoFeng looked down at the bright red cape that he was wearing, and then looked up at his faded cloths, and laughed.

"By the time I get as many servants as you do now, I'm going to wear those exact same cloths too."

"Oh?"

"Your cloths are cloths only the richest of the rich could wear, I don't deserve it yet."

"Why?"

"Because once a man really have got some money, it doesn't matter what he wears anymore."

"Pity you would never be rich!" Huo Xiu smiled.

"Why?"

"Because you are too smart, nobody that smart ever get rich."

"But last time we met, you said that I was going to end up rich sooner or later."

"That was because I didn't find out how smart you really are."

"So when did you find out?"

"Just now."

Lu XiaoFeng laughed again.

"Other than you, there may not be another man who could get to here as effortlessly as you have."

"Is it because nobody else is as obedient as me?" Lu XiaoFeng joked.

Huo Xiu nodded.

"When they see the word "push" on the door, at least 9 out of 10 men would not have been able to bring themselves to push the door, and if you don't push open the door there is no way you can get in here. If you don't turn when you see the word "turn", then nobody could have hoped to be able to walk out of my maze. If you don't stop when you see the word "stop", then even if you avoided getting turned into a porcupine by arrows, you would have lost at least a layer of skin from boiling hot oil poured on you."

"But the most dastardly thing is probably that poisonous gas you put into that room above us, even Hua ManLou almost fell for it. There probably aren't too many people who could have guessed that not only wasn't there any poison in the wine, but that's where the antidote was."

"But you guessed."

Lu XiaoFeng cracked a smile.

"I only know that no matter if you are a good man or a bad man, you are at least not one who would lie to your friends. Because you don't have that many friends to begin with, so you can't afford to lose one."

Huo Xiu stared at him with those bright eyes of his, stared at him for a long time.

"What else do you know?" He suddenly asked.

Lu XiaoFeng also stared at him, stared at him for a long time.

"I also know that your surname isn't Huo, that your name was originally ShangGuan Mu." He slowly replied.

"That's right." Huo Xiu's face did not even change as he casually replied.

"You, along with Yan TieShan and DuGu YiHe were all once important officials of the Golden Roc Empire."

"That's right."

"When the Golden Roc Empire fell, the three of you were charged with taking all the riches of the treasury and bringing them here, to China."

"That's right."

His face still looked peaceful, without even the slightest hint of regret or sorrow.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"But then you three took advantage of the situation and kept the riches, as soon as you arrived in China, you went into hiding and did not go look for the 13th Emperor as you were ordered to do so...."

"You are wrong." Huo Xiu suddenly interrupted him.

"Wrong?" Lu XiaoFeng frowned.

"Wrong about a small point."

"Which is?"

"The ones who did not keep their promise was not us, but that little Prince that escaped with ShangGuan Sheng."

Lu XiaoFeng was speechless, he did not expect that point, he had not even consider the possibility of it.

"Not only was he not at the agreed upon location, he has been hiding from us until now. We had been searching all these years and still could not find him."

"So if that's the case, then it's not you guys that has been avoiding him, but he who has been avoiding you."

"That's right."

"You three were all important and trusted officials of the former Emperor, and had a huge amount of riches with you. Why would he be hiding from you? Is there something wrong with him?"

"Because that huge mountain of riches does not belong to him," Huo Xiu coldly observed. "It belongs to the Golden Roc Empire."

"There is a difference?"

"There is a huge difference."

"Oh."

"If he accept all these riches, then he was committed to somehow use that money to restore the Golden Roc Empire. That's not an easy thing to do, not only will there be many hardship along the way, he could lost his life at any moment."

Lu XiaoFeng agreed. To be born to royalty is not necessarily a fortunate thing. "Pray that I never ever ever be reborn to royalty" was a sentence whose bitterness and hardship that not many people can understand.

Huo Xiu's eyes suddenly looked exceedingly hopeless and sad.

"It's a shame that our little Emperor did not have the makings of a great general." He slowly said.

"What kind of a person is he?" Lu XiaoFeng could not help but ask.

"He was like the Late Emperor Li, a poet, and also like Song HuiZong, a painter; ever since he was little, he had been called by others as a Genius of the Three, 'poetry, writing, and painting.'" He sighed and continued. "To a person like him, who he is naturally wasn't important to him, losing his throne was probably not a big deal to him, as long as he could write poetry, sing songs, live a carefree and worry-free life, that was all he wanted, besides...."

"Yes?"

"Besides, the portion of money that ShangGuan Sheng took with him was more than enough to last all of them a life time of carefree living."

Lu XiaoFeng did not speak again, but his silence did not mean that he believed.

"You don't believe me?"

Lu XiaoFeng still did not speak.

"The rations and weapons that we gathered in preparations for the restoration is just outside, you probably just saw them didn't you?"

Lu XiaoFeng nodded.

"We really did make quite a bit using the riches of the Empire, but it

was only with the goal of using that money to organize an army to fight for the restoration of the Empire, because, as you said, we are the most important officials of the present dynasty. But if our Emperor does not show up, then what would we be fighting for?"

His words were almost forcing Lu XiaoFeng to believe him, even if he did not want to.

"But if he had really hid from you all these years, why is he suddenly trying to find you now?" He had to ask one final question.

"It's not like there hasn't been people coming to us before." Huo Xiu coldly replied.

"Oh?"

"Those four old men out there, I trust that you have already ran into them."

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly had an epiphany.

"You mean that they are all fakes trying to get their hands on the fortune?"

Huo Xiu nodded.

"They want to get rich, so I let them sit facing all that money all day everyday, they want to pretend to be king, so I let them sit on that throne

and wear those Dragon Robes all day everyday." Huo Xiu casually said. "Even though they tried to cheat their way to the money, you can't say that I have mistreated them at all."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed and cracked a rather awkward smile.

"Turns out you are not a good man either, a good man would never treat anyone like that."

But in reality he had to admit that there probably was not a more appropriate way to deal with people like that.

"This matter was supposed to be a great secret, other than the four of us and our little Prince turned Emperor, nobody else should have known about this."

"If that's the case, then how come they know about it?"

"They don't either."

Lu XiaoFeng was speechless, he could not comprehend what Huo Xiu was saying.

"The one that knows about this secret is another, they are nothing but pawns being used by that person."

"Who is this other person?"

"Don't know."

"Even they don't know?"

"If you were him, would you appear without disguise?" Huo Xiu sneered.

"No, I wouldn't," Lu XiaoFeng answered back with a pitiful smile.

"In total, they have seen that man three times, every time they met him, he would look completely different, if it wasn't for the fact that his voice did not change, they would not have even believed it was the same person."

"So it seems not only is this man's planning flawless, he is also a master of disguises."

Hua ManLou had been listening quietly at the side until now.

"The real masters of disguises could change their voice as well." He suddenly interrupted.

"Oh?" Lu XiaoFeng replied.

"The art of disguising oneself is part of Ninjatsu that came from the three islands of Japan off the east coast. In the art, there is a particular skill that, once mastered, could allow the practioner to control the muscles inside his throat, making it possible for him to completely

change his voice."

{Apparently, Japan did not include Hokkaido at that time.}

"Could you be tricked by it as well?" Lu XiaoFeng wondered.

"If one truly masters this skill, even I can't tell the difference."

"Then could the Golden Roc Emperor that asked us be a fake as well?"
Lu XiaoFeng asked himself.

"The reason I asked SiKong ZhaiXing to steal ShangGuan DanFeng from you was to check if she was real or not, pity he just happens to be a friend of yours as well!"

"Good thing you did succeed in the end and ShangGuan DanFeng still ended up in your hands in the end."

"Who said she is in my hands?"

"She isn't?" Lu XiaoFeng frowned.

"No."

Lu XiaoFeng was shocked again, for he knew that Huo Xiu was not the lying type.

But if Huo Xiu was not lying, then why did ShangGuan DanFeng suddenly disappear? He could not figure it out, nobody could have figured it out.

"I still have not even laid my eyes on her yet!" Huo Xiu added.

"Then have you seen ShangGuan FeiYan?" Lu XiaoFeng probed.

"I haven't even heard of that name before!"

Lu XiaoFeng was even more confused. None the sudden twists and turns of this whole story was what he had expected at all.

All he could do was force a sorry smile onto his face.

"No wonder as soon as Yan TieShan tried to chase me away as soon as he heard me bring up this matter. He probably thought I was also trying to trick away that treasure."

"But at the time you thought that he was mad and frustrated because his old secret had been discovered." Huo Xiu commented.

Lu XiaoFeng had to admit Huo Xiu was right. Only now did he finally understand why Yan TieShan had such a strange expression on his face when he saw ShangGuan DanFeng just before he died. But could ShangGuan DanFeng be the mastermind behind all of this?

But he still could not believe that all of this was a lie. If this was a set up,

then why were there so many people trying to prevent him from meddling in this matter? And further more, why would the Green Shirt Pavilion get involved in this matter to try and prevent him from meeting with the Golden Roc Emperor?

"When was the last time you saw that little Emperor?" Hua ManLou suddenly asked.

"A little more than 40 years ago."

"And how old was he at the time?"

"Thirteen."

"Fourty years, even a thirteen year old boy would have turned into an old man." Hua ManLou mused.

Huo Xiu sighed deeply.

"Time has no mercy, everyone will turn old one day."

"Then how could you tell whether or not a 60 year old man now was the same 13 year old Emperor back then?" Hua ManLou asked.

"There is a secret, an even more closely guarded secret." Huo Xiu answered in a heavy and quiet voice.

Hua ManLou did not ask any further, he believed that everyone was entitled to their own secrets.

But Huo Xiu continued. "But I trust you two, I'm willing to tell this secret to you."

Hua ManLou used his silence to show his gratefulness, to be able to gain the trust of a man like Huo Xiu is not an easy matter.

"Every Golden Roc Emperor have always had a birth defect, every single one of them has had 6 toes on both of their feet."

"So that's what you used to find out that those old men were fake!" Lu XiaoFeng realized.

Huo Xiu nodded.

"Even if other people found out about this secret, it would still be very difficult to fake. I still haven't seen a second person with 6 toes on both feet."

"I haven't even seen one." Lu XiaoFeng replied.

Huo Xiu smiled.

"Well, there aren't that many with four eye brows either."

Lu XiaoFeng smiled as well.

"So all you have to do now, is to get this Golden Roc Emperor of yours to take off his boots and count his toes," Huo Xiu instructed. "Then you'd be able to tell if he's real or not."

"That's not too difficult."

"Getting a man to take off his boots must surely be easier than getting a girl to take off her pants." Huo Xiu smiled.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"Seems like you really truly aren't a gentleman, not at all."

Huo Xiu sighed as well.

"To be a good man isn't hard, but to stoop as low as I have, now that's difficult."

Lu XiaoFeng understood what he meant. When someone has to look after as big of a fortune as he, he would have to resort to stooping to the lowest of lows to guard against others.

"If that Golden Roc Emperor of yours is the real Emperor, then I would finally be able to get this huge burden off of my shoulders," Huo Xiu continued. "If not then...."

"If not then I'll invite him here to keep those four men outside company." Lu XiaoFeng finished Huo Xiu's thought.

By the time they walked out of that mysterious cave, it was already dawn. The spring winds were cold yet refreshingly clean, the hillside was covered with a new born green, and the dew drops on the grass leaves looked like gems under the new light. What a wonderful and beautiful world it is.

The first thing that Lu XiaoFeng did was take a very deep breath.

"My premonition was correct," he said with a tired smile. "I ran into something weird again."

How this matter had turned out was something nobody anybody could have predicted.

"Think about it," Hua ManLou suddenly said. "Do you really think there are people in this world with 6 toes on both feet?"

"I don't know, never seen one before though."

"If there isn't that kind of a person like that in the world, then we can't ever find the 'real' Golden Roc Emperor can we? Then won't Huo Xiu's words become the truth even if they aren't true?"

Lu XiaoFeng thought about it for a bit.

He suddenly smiled.

"I only know that this is a strange world that we live in, where there are all kind and every kind of strange people."

Hua ManLou smiled too.

"That's right, if there is a person that have 4 eye brows, then why can't there be a person that have 6 toes? It's a shame though, you only have 2 of those 4 eye brows left."

Lu XiaoFeng ran his fingers along where his mustache used to be.

"You are wrong again." He smiled.

"What about?"

"No matter how often a person shaves off his mustache, it would always grow back."

As soon as he finished his words, he suddenly saw a person walking out from behind the thick morning fog like a ghost.

Her face was white, she was obviously tired and vulnerable, but still very beautiful.

Lu XiaoFeng recognized her.

"Miss Yie XiuZhu?"

Yie XiuZhu nodded.

"Is Miss Yie waiting here for someone?"

Yie XiuZhu shook her head.

"I have been here since last night."

"Why?"

"We buried our master and little sister here," she grimly replied. "Elder Martial Sister was tired, but I... I couldn't sleep."

She was definitely the most honest and most shy of the Four Beauties of E'Mei, she could barely bring herself to speak when talking to a man.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed. There was an enormous amount of sympathy and sorrow that was in his heart for this girl, but he did not know what to say.

"We couldn't catch up to XiMen ChuiXue," She suddenly spoke up again. "So... we don't even know if our Third Martial Sister is dead or alive."

"I'll find her for you." Lu XiaoFeng promised her.

Yie XiuZhu's head bowed even lower.

"I have something else to tell you." She said after a long time, in a voice barely above a whisper.

Lu XiaoFeng waited for her to continue.

"It should have been my Third Martial Sister who told you this, but before she was finished, she was... was...." She suddenly could not control her voice anymore and had to stop to gather herself. She quietly and gently wiped away the tears around her eyes with her sleeve and continued. "The reason why our master had made this trip here was because he had received information that the First Pavilion of Green Shirt Pavilion is on the hill behind Pearl and Diamond Pavilion."

"No information is absolutely correct, no matter who it came from." Lu XiaoFeng uttered before he could stop himself.

Yie XiuZhu's head shot up.

"But our Third Martial Sister was hit because of this information. Obviously someone did not want her to say it. That's why I felt that this was of great importance and that you had to be told of it." There were traces of indignation on her face, even her voice got a bit louder.

Lu XiaoFeng could not help but feel sorry towards her again.

"I know you meant good," He forced a smile on his face. "No matter what happens, after I get to the bottom of all of this you would be the first one that I tell."

Yie XiuZhu's head went back to looking down again as she was silent for a long time.

"So where are you going now?" She barely whispered.

"We are going to see a man with 6 toes on his foot...."

Yie XiuZhu's head shot back up again as she seemed startled by his comment. Suddenly, she turned around and left.

Hua ManLou sighed.

"Right now, she's probably thinking that you are insane."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed too.

"Right now, even I am having more and more doubts about my sanity."

The long hall way was dark and quiet, they were waiting at the very end

of the hall, somebody had already gone in to inform the Golden Roc Emperor of their arrival.

"So are you sure you can get him to take off his boots?" Hua ManLou quietly asked, he had to know.

"No."

"Have you thought of any way of doing it?"

"I thought of several ways to do it, but I can't decide on which one to use."

"Well, give me two examples."

"I can accidentally knock over a flask of water onto his feet on purpose; or I could say that I really like his boots and ask him if he could take them off for me to get a closer look at them."

"Do you have any idea how idiotic those ideas are?" Hua ManLou frowned.

"Of course I know," Lu XiaoFeng put up a pitiful smile. "But this entire thing is idiotic in and of itself, so how do you expect me to think of any non-idiotic ideas?"

He stopped, because the door had just been opened.

The Golden Roc Emperor was still sitting on that huge but comfortable chair, his face was covered with anxious excitement.

"So did you guys find those 3 traitors?" He did not even wait until they had walked into the room before asking.

"Only found two." Lu XiaoFeng replied.

"Well where are they?" Golden Roc Emperor's face seemed to glow.

"They are dead."

The Golden Roc Emperor's expression noticeably changed.

"Dead? How?"

"Everyone dies."

Lu XiaoFeng was not really paying attention to his answers because he had not seen the Golden Roc Emperor's feet --- the Golden Roc Emperor's was covered from his thighs on down with a silk blanket decorated with golden colored dragons, as if he was afraid of cold.

But Hua ManLou had already succinctly told him what had happened.

"We haven't found Huo Xiu yet, because quite simply he is a very difficult person to find," he added on at the end. This was the first time

he had ever lied, he suddenly discovered that lying was not a hard thing to do at all.

Because when he said that lie, he did not feel in his heart that he had wrong anyone with the lie.

The Golden Roc Emperor let out a long sigh.

"I had wanted to see them to see if they still had enough face and dignity to see me." He bitterly declared.

"But we want to see a person right now as well!" Hua ManLou suddenly said.

"Who?"

"Zhu Ting."

"Actually I was just about to ask you," the Golden Roc Emperor frowned. "I have already twice dispatched men to get him, and yet he still did not come."

Hua ManLou thought about it for a bit before cracking a smile.

"This is probably because he's such a lazy person to begin with."

"Those dragons on your blanket look great," Lu XiaoFeng suddenly

spoke up, "they almost look real."

This was another idiotic sentence, after that, he did another idiotic thing. He actually went up and lifted the blanket. He froze like a real idiot, completely motionless, in the middle of his motion to lift the blanket. There was nothing coming out from the ends of the Golden Roc Emperor's pants, both of his legs had been cut off from the knees on down.

"You are probably wondering why my legs had suddenly disappeared aren't you?"

All Lu XiaoFeng could do was nod like an idiot.

"Remember that old problem that my legs had?" The Golden Roc Emperor sighed. "If I touch wine, they would start hurting a great deal. Once a man gets old, he finds more and more problems."

This was true, he had told Lu XiaoFeng this the last time he was here.

"But once you get to my age, what other joys do you have but to drink a bit of wine?" The Golden Roc Emperor smiled pathetically.

"So... you snuck in a couple of drinks?" Lu XiaoFeng barely forced a smile back onto his face.

"I figured that a little bit couldn't hurt, but I had just had 3 cups when my legs started to swell up, and they were filled with pus, so... so I decided to get rid of them once and for all and told Liu YuHen to

amputate them."

He suddenly stopped and bust out laughing. "I might not have my legs anymore, but at least now I can drink without any worries. Tonight I will have to challenge you two to a drinking contest, let's see if this old man here can hold his wine as good as you youngsters."

All Lu XiaoFeng could do was look at him with a silly smile on his face.

"Had you guys gotten back a few days earlier, I would have surely brought out those two cut off legs and let you guys have a see, to prove that even though I am an old man, I still have that warrior spirit within me."

"Where are you legs now?" Lu XiaoFeng had to ask.

"I had them burned."

"Burned? Why did you have them burned?" Lu XiaoFeng was startled.

"Those two legs had prevented me from drinking wine for 10 years, what did you expect me to do but burn them? Did you expect me to use them as snacks to go down with the wine?"

Lu XiaoFeng had nothing more to say. Looking at the proud and self-assured expression on this old man's face, he suddenly felt like a simpleton, a really idiotic simpleton at that.

The hallway was still dark and sinister as they slowly walk out from within it.

"Well, at least we solved that problem." Hua ManLou suddenly smiled.

"Oh?"

"You don't have to think of ways to take off his boots anymore, because he doesn't have any boots to begin with!"

"Since when did you get a sense of humor?" Lu XiaoFeng coldly replied.

But this matter was not funny at all. Now even Huo Xiu would not be able to tell if this Golden Roc Emperor was real or not.

If you say this was just a coincidence, he just could not believe at how perfect and convenient this coincidence was.

If you say this was not a coincidence, then how could the Golden Roc Emperor had known about this secret? They headed straight for here as soon as they left Huo Xiu's little place. Unless the Golden Roc Emperor had eyes and ears that work from thousands of kilometers away, there was no way that he could have known that they were coming to look at his feet.

"If my legs swelled up every time I drank, I just might have them cut off as well." Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"Looks like there is quite a few people in this world who would rather die before they stop drinking." Hua ManLou sighed in return.

"That room is probably still left vacant for you, why don't you go and get some sleep, don't forget that someone wants to challenge you to a drinking contest tonight." Lu XiaoFeng suddenly said.

"What about you?"

"I'm going to find a person."

"Who?"

"A woman, of course. A woman with a foot."

Hua ManLou's face immediately gained a glow.

"That's right, you have to go and find a woman with 6 toes as soon as possible."

"Oh!"

"Don't forget that the every Golden Roc Emperor of every generation has had 6 toes, this is something that they passed down. So if ShangGuan DanFeng is the daughter of the Golden Roc Emperor, she should have 6 toes as well, you...."

He stopped talking, because he suddenly discovered that Lu XiaoFeng had already disappeared.

Close to dusk, but not quite dusk. The flowers in the garden was just in full bloom, the wind was filled with their fragrance, but nobody was there.

ShangGuan Xue-Er was not in the garden. Lu XiaoFeng was not looking for ShangGuan DanFeng, because he knew for a fact that ShangGuan DanFeng could not possibly be here.

The Golden Roc Emperor had not uttered a single word inquiring about his daughter's whereabouts. This was another strange matter.

Lu XiaoFeng did not have time to think of such matters, right now he only want to find ShangGuan Xue-Er as quickly as possible and ask her a question, a very important question.

When he did not want to see her, she was always going back and forth in front of him, but now that he wants to see her, there was nary a trace of her to be found anywhere. Lu XiaoFeng sighed, made his way through a little trial in the midst of the flowers, and suddenly discovered a little door.

The door had been slightly hidden, behind it was a small little yard, in the middle of the yard was a well.

He pushed open the door, walked in, and finally found ShangGuan Xue-Er, this little devil always seemed to be up to something weird.

Right at this moment she was actually squatting there in the middle of the yard, by herself, staring unblinkingly at a piece of empty ground with those big eyes of hers, seemingly mesmerized.

But there was nothing on the ground, not even a single leaf of grass.

Lu XiaoFeng could not figure it out for the life of him what could be so interesting about a piece of ground.

"Hey older cousin," he finally had to ask. "What are you looking at?"

Xue-Er did not reply, nor did she even turn around. Even when scholars finally take their examinations could not hope to match her concentration at this moment.

So what in the world was this little devil looking at? Lu XiaoFeng's curiosity was piqued.

Therefore he crouched over as well, crouched at Xue-Er's side. Where ever Xue-Er's eyes wondered, there his eyes would wonder as well. He still could not see anything.

It obviously had not rained there in a long time, the dirt was very dry, the flowers and grass in garden just outside was flourishing, but yet in here was a layer of completely bare dirt.

Even that well looked as if it had been out of use for a long time, even the little rack at the top of the well was covered in dirt, on the sides of the yard was a couple of old and worn down rooms, the locks on the doors of the rooms were covered with rust.

Lu XiaoFeng looked right and looked left, and still could not see what Xue-Er was doing crouching here.

"When my grandfather was alive," Xue-Er suddenly spoke up, "this was where he meditated."

Lu XiaoFeng knew that her grandfather was ShangGuan Sheng, the very same man, along with Huo Xiu and company, who had received the orders to help the little Emperor, he was also the Golden Roc Emperor's royal uncle.

"Even since my grandfather died, nobody has been here."

"So what are you doing here?" Lu XiaoFeng finally gave up and asked again.

Xue-Er suddenly snapped her head around and stared at him.

"That's exactly what I wanted to ask you, what are you doing here?"

"I... I'm here looking for you."

"What for?"

"To see you, and to chat with you."

Xue-Er put up a hurt face.

"You don't believe a single word that I say, so what's there for me to chat with you about!" She sneered.

Lu XiaoFeng smiled.

"How do you know that I don't believe a single word you say?"

"You said it yourself."

Lu XiaoFeng blinked.

"So you actually think that every single word that I say is the truth?"

Xue-Er stared at him with those huge eyes of hers, stared at him for a long time. Then she suddenly burst out laughing.

Lu XiaoFeng laughed as well. He suddenly discovered that when Xue-Er laughs, she looked every bit like a really obedient and honest girl.

Bud suddenly Xue-Er suddenly stiffened up her face again.

"Whatever you want to talk to me about, come on, talk."

"I want to ask you, when was the last time you saw your sister?"

"That day in which she brought back Hua ManLou, which is also the day we left to get you."

"And you haven't seen her since you got back?"

"No." The hints of sadness appeared on her face again. "She was always so nice to me, even if she was going to go out, she would leave a word for me or something. But this time... this time she must have been killed by someone."

There was a trace inside Lu XiaoFeng's eyes that his mind was not all there.

"Does she go out often?"

"She didn't use to dare to go out, but after grandfather died, she got braver and braver. Not only did she leave more and more often, she would often leave and stay out an entire half a month or so. I have always suspected that she had met someone outside, but she wouldn't admit it no matter what."

"Our parents died a long time ago, so we had always been with our grandfather. My sister isn't afraid of anything in the world, but she's afraid

of grandpa."

"And your uncle never tried to control her?"

Xue-Er shook her head.

"Even he wanted to he couldn't. One time he even resorted to locking my sister in her room, and my sister still found a way to escape and get out."

"Is he usually good to your sister?"

"No, he would always get mad at my sister and berate her, saying that she was destroying the ShangGuan family name, but my sister would never listen to him."

She bit her lips before quietly continuing. "That's why I suspect he has killed my sister."

"But your sister isn't dead."

"Says who?"

"Hua ManLou saw her not so long ago."

"He saw my sister? He's as blind as a bat, how could he see my sister?"
Xue-Er laughed coldly.

"He could tell from your sister's voice."

Xue-Er's facial expression suddenly changed.

"That must be ShangGuan DanFeng pretending to be her, the two of them had always looked alike ever since they were little, back then they even often tried to imitate the other's voice. One time she covered my eyes and used my sister's voice to talk to me, even I was fooled."

An extremely weird expression had also Lu XiaoFeng's face, even though this matter was getting more and more twisted, it was also getting more and more interesting.

Xue-Er's fists were fiercely clenched.

"Now that you said that, I understand it all now," she suddenly said. "The one who kill my sister must be her and no other."

"You are talking about ShangGuan DanFeng?"

Xue-Er nodded.

"On the surface she might have always been nice to my sister, but my sister had always said that it was all fake, all a show. Because she had always been jealous of my sister for being prettier than her and smarter than her." She did not let Lu XiaoFeng reply and continued. "After she had killed my sister, she purposefully appeared as my sister in front of

Hua ManLou to trick you guys into thinking that my sister isn't dead yet."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed. He did not know what to say. Even though Xue-Er's words were quite crazy, but was nevertheless possible.

Xue-Er suddenly grabbed his hand.

"That's why I need you to do me a favor."

"What kind of favor?"

"I need you to help me dig up my sister's body!"

"You know where your sister's body had been buried?"

"I know, I'm absolutely sure of it."

Lu XiaoFeng wanted to laugh, but could not laugh.

Xue-Er's expression, however, was still very serious.

"I was always searching inside the garden and could never find it. But now I discovered that this must be where she had killed my sister, and this must be where she had buried the body."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"How did you find out?"

"In my grandpa's later years, he turned into this real life monk. Not only would he refuse to kill even one solitary ant, he would often bring small pieces of rice to feed them, hence this yard used to be crawling with ants." She was so excited that her face was flushed red from it. "But I had just stayed here and looked for 4 hours straight and haven't seen a single ant."

"And therefore you think...."

"I think that there must be poison just under the surface," Xue-Er eagerly finished the thought. "So that even ants were scared off."

"Poison?"

"She must have used poison to kill my sister. Now the poison had seeped out of my sister's body and into the ground, so even the ground had been killed by the poison."

"Dirt can be killed by poison?"

"Of course, there is such a thing as soil that's alive or dead. Only soils that are alive can have grass and flowers growing on it, and little bugs and ants in them."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed again.

"You think way too much you know? If a person thinks too much as a child, then when that person grows up she will age extremely fast."

"So you don't want to help me?" Xue-Er stared at him.

"I have already done enough idiotic things for one day." Lu XiaoFeng smiled at his own misfortunes.

Xue-Er once again stared at him for a long time.

"Help! Help!" She suddenly began shouting. "Help! Lu XiaoFeng is trying to rape me!"

Lu XiaoFeng panicked.

"I haven't even touched you yet, what the hell are you shouting for?"

"Not only would I yell now, from now on, every time I see a person who knows you, I would tell them that you constantly raped me!"

"I constantly raped you?!" This time it was Lu XiaoFeng who shouted.

"Mmhmm, constantly, meaning that you have raped me lots and lots of times already."

"And you think anyone would believe you stuff that a little girl like you

spiels out?"

"If anyone doesn't believe, then I would take off my cloths, so they can see for themselves exactly whether or not I'm still little!"

Lu XiaoFeng looked at her in shock.

"This little girl is crazy, absolutely insane!" He mumbled to himself, unable to stop shaking his head in disbelief.

"Ok, good, because I'm crazy, I'm going to starting shouting again." And she really did resume shouting.

But this time Lu XiaoFeng covered her mouth very quickly.

"You couldn't possibly want me to start digging now do you?"

Xue-Er nodded.

"So you are going to help me?" She asked as soon as he took his hands away from her mouth.

"I'm only wondering where in the world did you learn that from?" Lu XiaoFeng, once again, smiled pitifully at his own luck.

Xue-Er smiled as well.

"This is one of the 3 oldest tricks women can use on men, only now do I know how effective this is."

"So what are the other 2 tricks?"

"Why should I tell you," Xue-Er coyly replied. "I still have to save them to use against you!"

She jumped up excitedly.

"I'm going to go find a hoe for you. You best stay here and wait like a good boy. Tonight I'll go and steal a couple of pigeons so I can fry them for you to eat with your wine."

"Pigeons?"

"My sister kept a lot of pigeons, normally she would not allow anyone to go near them, but now... now I don't think she would mind anymore."

The hints of sadness appeared on her face once again, she suddenly turned around and quickly ran away.

Looking at her pigtailed swaying back and forth behind her as she ran away, a very strange expression suddenly appeared on Lu XiaoFeng's face again. He suddenly jumped up and caught up to Xue-Er.

"I'll go and find a hoe with you."

"Why?"

Lu XiaoFeng laughed.

"I'm scared that you might be carried away by those pigeons."

His smile looked a little strange as well.

Xue-Er looked back at him.

"You are afraid that I might suddenly disappear like my sister aren't you?"

A cold breeze whisked through, several swallows took off from behind the flower bushes and flew over the wall. The color of the sky was getting darker and darker.

Lu XiaoFeng stared at the disappearing shadows of the swallows in the dusk light, he suddenly sighed.

"Even swallows do not want to stay in this place, not to mention people...."

Had ShangGuan FeiYan, like those swallows, flew away over these walls? Or was she already buried under earth?

Why did ShangGuan DanFeng suddenly disappear as well? Could it be

that the Golden Roc Emperor already knew of her whereabouts and therefore did not inquire about it from them?

On those two amputated legs of his, were there 6 toed feet? Could anyone in the world answer those questions?

Dusk, after dusk. The wind became even colder and cleaner. The cold, clean wind came blowing in from the window and onto his skin, that was how Hua ManLou know that day had turned into night.

His skin was just like his nose and his ears, it possessed a sensitivity that was far beyond that of the average man.

But right now he was in no mood to enjoy this fresh, just after dusk, April breeze. His heart and mind was a mess.

Ever since he had met ShangGuan FeiYan in that little wine shop, his heart had often been very chaotic, especially whenever he was completely alone.

He just could not shake the feeling that something was not right, but as to exactly what that is, he could not tell.

It was getting close to dinner time, and Lu XiaoFeng still had not returned, nor had the Golden Roc Emperor sent anyone to inform him to get prepared for dinner.

The situation was changing again, he could almost feel it, but as to exactly what kind of change, he could not tell either.

At this precise moment, he suddenly noticed a very special fragrance along with the wind, just the very fragrance that had caused his heart to be so chaotic and unsettled.

Could ShangGuan FeiYan have returned? He lightly pressed his hand on the window sill and flew out of the window, he believed that his senses were not lying to him.

But he could not see a thing, in his world, there would never be light, never be color, only darkness. Hopeless darkness!

That earlier fragrance had seemingly mixed with the smell of the flowers, causing him to lose his awareness of its direction. But, from the direction where the fragrance was the strongest, he suddenly heard a voice.

"I've returned." It was ShangGuan FeiYan's voice.

Hua ManLou tried desperately to control the overflowing emotions within his heart. Only after a long time, did he finally relaxed and sighed.

"So you really have returned." He lightly replied.

"You knew that I would come back?"

"I didn't know, but I hoped."

"You were thinking of me?"

Hua ManLou smiled. His smile had within it an indescribable emotion, was it happiness? Or poignant bitterness?

But ShangGuan FeiYan had already walked up to him and grabbed his hand.

"What's the matter, are you not happy that I have returned?"

"There... there is just one thing that I can't figure out."

"What's that?"

"The last 2 times that I have seen you, another person would come to my mind."

"Who?"

"ShangGuan DanFeng."

As he said that name, he felt as if ShangGuan FeiYan's hand seemingly shook gently.

But her hand immediately grasped his hand lightly.

"You saw me, but yet thought of her?" She said, with a bit of spoiled jealousy in her voice.

"Mm!"

"Why?"

"Because... because I sometimes would mistake you and her to be the same person."

ShangGuan FeiYan laughed.

"Now why would you think of that?"

"I don't know either, that's why... I thought it was very strange as well."

"Did you actually believe my little sister's ideas? That ShangGuan FeiYan had been killed? And that this ShangGuan FeiYan is nothing but ShangGuan DanFeng in disguise?"

Hua ManLou did not reply, because there really was this suspicion in his heart, he did not want to lie to the face of the one that he loved.

"Do you still remember Cui YiDong? Do you still remember asking me whether or not I have ever heard the sound of snow falling on the roof?"

Can you feel that strange but wonderful power of life when the flower buds slowly blooming in the spring? Do you know that the Autumn winds often brings with it the sweet smells from trees and forests from hillsides far far away?"

Of course Hua ManLou remembered. Those questions were originally asked by him, but now ShangGuan FeiYan had repeated them word for word.

"If I am ShangGuan DanFeng, then how could I know about these words that you said to me? How could I remember it so clearly?"

Hua ManLou smiled, he suddenly realized that his suspicion was completely superfluous.

His heart once again filled with sympathy towards this girl, he could not stop himself from gently reaching up and stroking her hair.

ShangGuan FeiYan was already in his arms, holding him tightly. His heart was filled with an indescribable joy and satisfaction, he was in another world. At this moment, he suddenly felt ShangGuan FeiYan's hand reach the Jade-Pillow pressure point at the back of his head. He felt absolutely nothing after that.

There was already a hole about half a meter wide and one meter deep in the ground, and Lu XiaoFeng's body was already covered with sweat.

ShangGuan Xue-Er was squatting over by the side, with both her hands supporting her cheeks. She was telling him to hurry up non-stop.

"What are you stopping for? Keep digging, come on. You look so strong, who knew it would be so useless?"

Lu XiaoFeng wiped the sweat away with his sleeve.

"Because I haven't ate, right now I should be sitting in a very comfortable chair and drinking wine with your uncle," He mustered a smile. "But instead I'm here, like an idiot, digging a hole."

Xue-Er blinked.

"Then are you suggesting that a little girl like me should jump down there and dig while you watch on the side?"

"No, I'm not, that's why I'm suffering now."

"What are you talking about? Suffering? This is an honor."

"Honor?"

"Even if other men had got on their knees and begged me to dig a hole for me, I would not have even acknowledged them."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed, suddenly realizing that he really should not have

came looking for this little devil, really should not have talked to her to begin with.

But then he immediately discovered that he had thought wrong. At this last swing of the hoe, a bright red corner of clothing suddenly appeared in the dirt.

Xue-Er had already jump up.

"See? I was right wasn't I? There was someone buried under here!"

This time even if she did not egg him on, Lu XiaoFeng would have still kept on going. He put down the hoe and switched to the shovel. A couple of shovels later, the corpse was slowly becoming revealed. Amazingly, it had not began to decompose.

Xue-Er had already went and brought over the lantern that had been hanging above the well. The light just happened to illuminate the face of the corpse.

She suddenly screamed in horror, she almost dropped the lantern onto Lu XiaoFeng's head.

Lu XiaoFeng was shocked as well. He had never been this shocked before in his entire life.

The body was not that of ShangGuan FeiYan, incredibly, it was ShangGuan DanFeng!

The light from the lantern swayed back and forth, because Xue-Er's hands were shaking non-stop.

Not only had the face of the corpse not started to decompose, it was still incredibly maintain its life-like colors, both eyes were pushing out of their sockets, as if they were staring at Lu XiaoFeng.

Lu XiaoFeng had never been a coward, but when his mind wondered to those words that he and ShangGuan DanFeng had shared not so long ago, when he thought about her sweet and moving smile, even his hands went limp and he could not hold on to the shovel in his hand.

"Bang!"

The shovel fell from his hands and happened to land on the corpse. The sound of metal hitting on another was produced. Lu XiaoFeng had to bent over and touch the corpse, only then did he realize that the corpse was cold and hard, just as if it had been made of metal.

His hands were cold as well. He sighed despite of himself.

"She really was poisoned." He concluded.

"Who... who poisoned her?"

Lu XiaoFeng did not answer, because he did not know the answer.

"When people who die of poison, their bodies should decompose very quickly. So it would seem she wasn't killed that long ago." Xue-Er speculated.

"She had been dead for a long time."

"How do you know?"

"Because the poison in her body had seeped out into the soil."

Those words were exactly what Xue-Er said herself, she had been right all along.

"Besides, look at this piece of land, it hasn't been turned in at least a month or two." Lu XiaoFeng added.

"So you mean to tell me that she has been dead for at least one or two months?"

"Yes."

"Then why hasn't her body began to decompose?"

"Because the poison she died from is a very strange and peculiar poison. Some poison could even preserve a human body upwards of hundreds of years. Besides, not only is this piece of land extraordinarily dry, there isn't any traces of ants or bugs or any critters, any kind of body buried here would not decompose for quite a while."

His voice was monotonous and slow, because while he was saying one thing with his mouth, his mind was onto something else. So many things he thought about.

Xue-Er thought quietly as well.

"One or two months ago? My sister haven't gone to see Hua ManLou yet." She mumbled to herself.

Lu XiaoFeng, in deep thought, nodded.

"Only when my sister brought Hua ManLou back did I go with her to find you."

"That's right."

"If she had died a month or two ago, then how could she go and find you? How could you have met her?"

"The ShangGuan DanFeng that I met, was not the real ShangGuan DanFeng."

"Then who is it?"

Lu XiaoFeng did not answer her question, instead, he asked a question of his own.

"In these last two months, have you ever seen your sister and her at the same time?"

Xue-Er thought about it for a long time, then shook her head.

"No, I don't think so."

"In these last two months, have you felt that her attitude towards you were a little different?"

Xue-Er thought about it for a long time again, then nodded.

"Yes, when she ran into me before, she would always stay to talk and joke, but recently she seemed to be always avoiding me."

"That's because she was afraid that you finding out that she was no longer the real ShangGuan DanFeng!"

"Then who could she be?" Xue-Er frowned. "To be able to look so real, could it be...."

She suddenly jumped up again.

"Are you insinuating that the ShangGuan DanFeng that you saw was in fact my sister in disguise?" She almost shouted.

Lu XiaoFeng did not reply. Sometimes, no reply means a silent admittance.

Xue-Er fiercely stared at him.

"Are you saying that not only had ShangGuan DanFeng not kill my sister, but my sister had killed her!"

Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"I only know that it is a fact that she is dead now."

"But why would my sister kill her? Can you give me a motive or a reason?"

Lu XiaoFeng did not, but was it because he could not think of one? Or because he did not want to say it? He suddenly squat down to take off the corpse's shoe.

"What are you doing?" Xue-Er asked in surprise.

"I want to take a look at her feet."

"You are insane, absolutely, positively insane." Xue-Er shouted.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"I know that this is really quite insane, but I still have to take a look." He cracked a hopeless smile.

He took off the shoe, on those smooth and beautiful foot, there really was six toes.

Xue-Er suddenly fell silent. After a long time, she finally spoke up.

"That is really my cousin." She said in a melancholy voice.

"You knew that your cousin had six toes?"

"Mmhmm!"

"How did you know?"

"She... she would never let anyone see her feet, sometimes, when all of us would take off our shoes to go play by the river, only she wouldn't take off her shoes."

All girls want to be pretty, having six toes on her foot was not something to show off or brag about.

"The more she wouldn't let other people see, the more I wanted to see, so one day, I barged in on her while she was taking a bath."

Lu XiaoFeng cracked a miserable laugh, that was all he could manage,

this little devil seemed capable of anything.

"At first she was real mad, but then she begged me not to tell anyone."
Xue-Er continued.

"And you said yes?"

Xue-Er nodded.

"I have never told anyone about it before."

"Even your sister?"

"She doesn't know either, I never told her."

Lu XiaoFeng thought about it for a while.

"When did your uncle have his legs cut off?" He suddenly asked.

There was a look of surprise on Xue-Er's face.

"His legs were cut off? How come I did not know about this?"

Lu XiaoFeng was surprised by her response.

"You really didn't know?"

"Just yesterday noon, I saw him walk towards where my sister had kept her pigeons to feed my sister's pigeons for her."

A sudden glimmer suddenly appeared in Lu XiaoFeng's eyes.

"Someone had been impersonating my cousin for the last two months, how could it be that even my uncle did not see through it?" Xue-Er mumbled to herself.

She wanted to ask Lu XiaoFeng, but Lu XiaoFeng had suddenly disappeared.

The night was bleak and miserable, the dim light from the lantern shined upon the cold and frozen face of the corpse, the eyes of the corpse stood out, as if they were staring at her.

Xue-Er involuntarily shuddered.

"You shouldn't have stuck your nose in this." A cold voice suddenly said from the darkness.

She recognized this voice. Her heart sank.

The hallway was sinister and dark, the door was closed. Lu XiaoFeng knocked on the door. No response. A louder knock. Still no response.

The expression on his face had already changed. He suddenly rammed the door, and that door, which was around 10 centimeters thick, was incredibly smashed to pieces.

The kerosene lamp on the table was lit, but the chair was empty. The Golden Roc Emperor had been seemingly sitting on that chair this entire time, but now it seemed that he had disappeared.

There was no look of surprise on Lu XiaoFeng's face, as if all of this was exactly what he had expected.

That silk blanket with dragons on them was left sitting on the ground. He bent down with intentions of picking it back up, when he suddenly saw a hand.

A thin and withered hand, extending out from behind the chair. The fingers were bent, as if they were trying to grab something, but could not.

Lu XiaoFeng walked over and saw the Golden Roc Emperor.

The body of this old man was not yet cold, but his breathing had seized a long time ago. In his eyes were a trace of unspeakable panic, shock, and rage. Obviously, even at the moment of death, he could not believe that his killer would actually kill him.

On his other arm was a very deep knife cut, as if someone had wanted to cut off this hand, but did not.

His hand was clenched, the veins and tendons on the back of his hand was popping out, obviously even death could not make him let whatever was in his hand go.

Lu XiaoFeng squated down to take a closer look. Incredibly, his hand was holding a bright red shoe.

Just like the red shoes that brides wear during their weddings, but embroidered on it was not a solitary loon, nor was it an owl, but a swallow --- a flying swallow.

His grasp was too tight, too powerful, an originally very pretty red shoe was now squeezed and bent completely out of shape.

But his face was utterly and completely devoid of emotion, when set against that pair of panic and rage filled eyes, it created an even more frightening sight.

Lu XiaoFeng did not need to reach out and touch in order to see that his face had been very cleverly disguised.

This old man was obviously not the real Golden Roc Emperor! The Golden Roc Emperor had obviously died with his daughter!

Lu XiaoFeng looked into his eyes, then looked down at his amputated legs, and could not help but let out a long and exhausted sigh.

"I have done quite a number of idiotic things in life," he mumbled to himself. "But isn't what you have done even more idiotic?"

He did not finish his sentence, because he had already heard the very faint sound of a thin piece of metal piercing through the air.

The sword had come from outside the window behind him, it came fast, and it came furious. The person that was trying to kill him was undoubtedly one of the first rate swordsmen in the martial world. There was not that many first rate swordsmen in the world.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed again, he already knew who this person was.

His body had already slid aside about more than a meter.

"Liu YuHen," he sighed. "You shouldn't have come."

"But I already have!" Liu YuHen's voice coldly replied from outside of the window.

His sword was even faster than his words. The antique and beautiful window sill was instantaneously smashed into bits as he, along with his sword, came flying in.

Lu XiaoFeng did not look at him.

His sword was vicious and fast, and his moves were changing extraordinarily fast, every thrust was directed at a lethal spot.

Lu XiaoFeng's eyes never left the tip of his sword, just like how a kid's eyes would never leave the butterfly prancing in the air.

In a blink of an eye, Liu YuHen attacked him 17 times. It was then that Lu XiaoFeng finally made a move.

He only reached out and clamped his two fingers together. Nobody could convey the speed and agility with which this move of his was done, almost nobody could imagine it.

It was as if his fingers were directly connected to his heart, that at any moment, he could do anything he wanted with his fingers.

When Liu YuHen thrust his sword out for the 18th time, he suddenly discovered that his sword had been caught!

It was as if this sword had suddenly jammed into a rock, even with all the force that he could summon in his body, he could not pull it out.

The sword was attached to his right wrist, it was truly a part of him, yet he still could not pry his sword loose from between Lu XiaoFeng's fingers.

A steel hook was usually attached to that wrist of his, a steel hook that was able to pick up any type of weapon. Only when killing did he ever exchange the steel hook to a sword. He had obviously come here with the intention to kill.

Looking at his painful and distorted face, Lu XiaoFeng's heart suddenly flooded with sympathy.

"I don't want to kill you, just leave."

Liu YuHen did not answer with his mouth, his answer was the steel ball attached to his left wrist.

The steel ball came crashing down with the a whirl of wind, if Lu XiaoFeng did not let go, his head would have probably be flattened.

But he had a spare hand, when the steel ball came down, that spare hand of his swiped sideways, and Liu YuHen's left arm went limp.

"If I let go, will you leave?"

Liu YuHen suddenly let out a cold laugh, a cold laugh filled with disregard --- disregard towards Lu XiaoFeng, and disregard towards his own life.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"Why do I keep on running into these kinds of idiotic people? why..."

He did not finish, because he had just heard another person's voice.

It was supposed to be ShangGuan DanFeng's voice, but he knew that

ShangGuan DanFeng would never appear again.

The final burst of colors from the setting sun had disappeared, the room became even darker. Like a phantom a person appeared at the door, a very beautiful woman, beautiful yet warm and sweet.

She was looking at Lu XiaoFeng, smiling.

"Because you yourself is an idiot, idiots usually flock together."

Lu XiaoFeng did not need to look at this woman to know who she was.

"ShangGuan FeiYan?"

"That's right." Her smile was like that of an innocent little kid. "Do you think I'm prettier than ShangGuan DanFeng."

Lu XiaoFeng nodded, he had to agree with her.

ShangGuan DanFeng was undoubtedly a very beautiful girl, but the girl in front of him right now was so beautiful that she was approaching that perfect girl in every man's fantasies.

Not only was her smile beautiful, but it was pure and innocent, when she looked at you, it was as if she thought you were the only man in this entire world, and at the same time it made you feel as if she was the only girl left in the world.

ShangGuan DanFeng's smile could conjure up innumerable dreams and fantasies. Her smile could make you forget everything.

"You were wrong you know." Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"How so?"

"A girl as beautiful as you should never, for any reason, ever put on a disguise and pretend to be someone else."

ShangGuan FeiYan blinked.

"If you had seen my real face that night, would you have let me go?"

"If I had seen your real face earlier, I probably would not have waited until that night."

"Does that mean that even in the carriage you would have...."

"I told you, I'm not a man who can resist temptation."

ShangGuan FeiYan laughed: "You might not be a gentleman, but you are certainly honest about it."

"And not only are you not a lady, you are not honest about it either."

"If a girl is too honest, then she would be hard pressed not to fall for

the tricks of a man like you." ShangGuan FeiYan sweetly replied.

Her voice had changed too, it was as if it was a completely different person talking.

To Lu XiaoFeng, this change in voice was almost completely unimaginable.

He could understand masks and disguises, and he had seen, with his own eyes, those near legendary human-skin masks.

But he could not understand how a person's voice could completely change into that of another's.

It was easy for ShangGuan FeiYan to see his surprised expression.

"Is my voice better than ShangGuan DanFeng's?" She smiled.

Lu XiaoFeng gave up and smiled in return.

"By now you could probably see that I'm better than her in every way, but ever since birth, she had been on top of me." Her warm and sweet voice had suddenly filled with hate. "Ever since I was little, I had to wear cloths that she had worn, eat food that she had left, only because she was a Princess."

"So at the first opportunity, you had to proove that you were better than her."

ShangGuan FeiYan replied with a cold snicker.

"So once your grandfather died, you could not stay in this place a moment longer."

"Nobody likes to always serve a person, always being wary of that person's moods."

"You had planned on going around in the martial world, using your own abilities, and accomplish a couple of impressive and eye-brow raising things to show them. But you didn't plan on running into a man who could grab your heart."

The color on ShangGuan FeiYan's face changed a little.

"I knew that little devil would have told you everything."

"Not only did that man admire you, he also sympathized with you, so he found an opportunity for you."

"Keep going." ShangGuan FeiYan coldly instructed.

"Once he found out about the Golden Roc Emperor's secret, he thought of an idea for you."

ShangGuan FeiYan listened, that sweet smile on her face had long disappeared.

"He convinced you to think of a way to get the riches of the Golden Roc Empire from Yan TieShan and company. Anybody, no matter who, with that much money, would immediately be able to make a name for themselves."

"Men die for money, birds die for food." ShangGuan FeiYan coldly replied. "With that much money at stake, anybody would have been tempted."

"But you also know for a fact that your uncle and cousin would never approve of such a thing. Besides, if he is still alive, then even if you got all that money, it would just end up being his."

"Of course, I don't want to be doing all the work for someone else to make a fortune."

"So you and your lover came up with a brilliant plan."

"I had only planned on killing that senile Emperor, but no matter how cleverly disguised the person that I find to replace him is, there was no way that ShangGuan DanFeng could be fooled."

"So you decided to just kill her as well."

"Correct."

"Luckily, the two of you have always looked similar, and often

imitated each other's voice ever since you were little, so you were the perfect candidate to replace her and at the same time get a taste at what it's like to be a Princess."

"It wasn't that good of a taste." ShangGuan FeiYan snickered.

"Of course, with this kind of secret, you did not want a little girl who can't keep her mouth shut to know, so you kept Xue-Er in the dark the entire time. But ironically, she had somehow thought that it was you who had been killed by ShangGuan DanFeng."

"Not only can't that little devil keep her mouth shut," ShangGuan FeiYan bitterly commented. "She can't keep out of other people's business either."

"But what I'm wondering is why you didn't just go and find Huo Xiu and company yourselves."

"Because only afterwards did we discover that the Golden Roc Emperor must have had some secret mark or sign that only those official that were exiled along with him would know. So no matter who we find to be him, it would be nearly impossible to fool Huo Xiu and the rest of those old foxes."

"Did you know that he was had 6 toes on his foot at the time?"

"I didn't, but I wasn't going to risk it either."

"So you two figured that the best thing to do, was to first find a person

to go and kill those old foxes for you."

"Correct."

"But this wasn't an easy person to find." Lu XiaoFeng gave a self-deprecating smile. "Because not only must he have the ability to kill Huo Xiu and the others, he must also be naturally have that terrible habit of meddling in other people's affairs."

"This person was indeed very difficult to find." ShangGuan FeiYan casually concurred. "Other than you, we really could not think of another person."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"Looks like there really isn't too many people in the world like me."

"To get you to go along with this whole heartedly was another difficult problem."

"But fortunately, not only do I like meddling in other people's business, I also possess an attitude of an *** who was more persistent to not move the more you cajole it to move."

ShangGuan FeiYan finally laughed. "Turns out you know yourself quite well."

"So you purposefully ordered Soul Hooker and them to come and stop

me, because you know the more someone does not want me to do something, the more I want to go and do it."

"Those donkeys of ShanXi province are like that too." ShangGuan FeiYan joked.

"Then afterwards, when you killed Xiao QiuYu and DuGu Fang to warn me, it was for the same reason."

"And also because they really knew too much."

"The reason that you lured us into that old shrine with your singing and left a few strands of hair was nothing more than making Hua ManLou believe that you were still alive, right?"

"That and to make sure that you would not ever believe a single word that little devil said from then on."

"You knew that Xue-Er was peeking in from outside the window when you 'killed' Liu YuHen."

"Of course, that little devil had no clue that it was nothing more than a show that Liu YuHen and I put on for her." ShangGuan FeiYan coldly added.

"And when we saw that Liu YuHen was still alive, we would undoubtedly be even more sure that she was nothing more than a habitual liar." He sighed and laughed at himself. "Poor little girl, when she saw that Liu YuHen was still alive, she looked as if she had really just saw a real life

zombie, she was too frightened to say a single word and left with him!"

"I should have locked that little devil up from the beginning, pity that...."

"Pity that the things that you had to do in those couple of days were really too many, and you are also afraid that if we didn't see her when we got back we might get suspicious."

"Sometimes I really wonder about you," ShangGuan FeiYan sneered, "it's as if you know everything that's going on inside of me."

"Then you suddenly appeared to Hua ManLou, the purpose of which was to place all the blame on Huo Xiu."

"Right."

"But how could you have fooled him?" Lu XiaoFeng sighed. "Not only are his ears exceptionally sharp, his nose is very sensitive as well, even if he can't tell from your voice, he should be able to from your smell."

Everyone has their own distinctive smell that nobody else has, which is probably easier to distinguish than that person's voice.

"That's because every time I see him, I would always put on a very sweet and very thick type of flower powder, and then when I appear as ShangGuan DanFeng, I would have washed that fragrance completely off of me."

"You seemed to have thought of everything."

"That's because I'm a woman," ShangGuan FeiYan sweetly replied.
"Woman don't like taking chances."

"Then why did you make Liu YuHen to come and try to kill me?"

"You should know the reason for that as well." She casually answered.

"Is it because he is no longer useful to you now, so therefore you wanted to kill him through me?"

"I should have known by now that you didn't like killing," ShangGuan FeiYan sighed. "Or else I wouldn't have had to kill Yan TieShan myself either."

Ever since she had arrived, Liu YuHen seemed to have turned into a different person, turned very quiet.

Whenever he looked at her, that singular of his would convey a very warm kind of emotion.

But this last sentence by ShangGuan FeiYan was like a sharp dagger, suddenly piercing all the way into his heart.

"You... you really want me to die?" He shakily asked.

"You should have died a long time ago, what purpose does a person like you have in living?" ShangGuan FeiYan, coldly, did not even look in his direction.

"But you... you said...."

"Of course, everything that I said was a lie, to trick you. Do you really think that I would like you?"

Liu YuHen's entire body seemed to have been frozen, he stood there, motionless, staring mesmerizingly at her. His eye was filled with hate, but also filled with love. After what felt like forever, he finally, gently, sighed.

"You are right. Of course you wouldn't like me. I knew that all along. All along, I had just been lying to myself."

"Well at least you are not too stupid."

Liu YuHen slowly nodded. Suddenly he swung his sword around and sent it through his own chest.

The blade had pierced entirely through his heart as blood squirted like a fountain out of his back, covering the wall one drop at a time.

But his face had once again turned completely expressionless. Death, to him, did not seem to be a painful thing but a luxury.

His eye suddenly began to glow as he suddenly laughed.

"Turns out that dying isn't so hard after all," he mumbled, "but to die in front of you, at least I can...."

He collapsed before he could finish.

Lu XiaoFeng did not stop him, and could not stop him either. Sometimes, dying in peace is better than living.

"He really is a passionate man, full of love, it's a shame that he used his love on the wrong person."

Lu XiaoFeng looked over at ShangGuan FeiYan, he was suddenly overwhelmed with great disgust toward this girl who was totally void of compassion.

Not hatred, but disgust, just like the feeling that people have towards poisonous snakes.

"You did a stupid thing as well." He coldly observed.

"Oh?"

"You shouldn't have forced him to die."

"Why?"

"Because if he is alive, at least he won't see me kill you."

"You want to kill me? Do you have the heart for it?"

"I truthfully don't like killing, further more, I have never killed a woman, but you are an exception."

ShangGuan FeiYan laughed.

"If that's the case, then what are you waiting for?"

"I'm in no hurry!"

"Of course you are not in a hurry, it's not like I can run away now."
ShangGuan FeiYan casually said. "Besides, you still have questions you want to ask me!"

"Seems like you are not an idiot either."

"Do you want to ask me why I would make Liu YuHen cut off that old man's legs before you arrived? And how I suddenly found out that he was suppose to have 6 toes?"

"That I don't need to ask you anymore."

"You already figured it out?"

"Pigeons are faster than humans."

"You really are quite smart." ShangGuan FeiYan sighed.

"I shouldn't have leaked the secret to Yie XiuZhu."

"She was the only one you told?"

"That's right."

"Did you leak the secret by accident? Or were you testing her?"

"I didn't want to hurt her," Lu XiaoFeng sighed. "She is a poor girl as well."

ShangGuan FeiYan suddenly let out a cold snicker.

"You are wrong about her. She might look very honest and good, but in reality she's a natural born *****."

"Just because she fell in love with the same man as you?"

"He's just using her that's all," ShangGuan FeiYan's face turned green.
"Just like how I was using Liu YuHen."

"Yie XiuZhu told him about the secret, and he messaged you using the pigeons."

ShangGuan FeiYan nodded, her expression suddenly turned very warm and calm.

"That black pigeon was originally used for carrying love letters between us, turns out it would come in handy in other ways as well."

"If he could give commands to Soul Hooker and Iron Faced Judge, then could he possibly be the leader of the Green Shirt Pavilion?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know."

"Do you actually expect me to tell you?"

"Of course I don't expect you to tell me now."

"I won't tell you later either, you will never know who he is."

"But you are a woman."

"What of it?"

"Even a pretty girl like you, if you had your nose cut off, you would

undoubtly be very ugly." Lu XiaoFeng coldly observed.

"You... you can bring yourself to cutting off my nose?" ShangGuan FeiYan asked in shock and panic.

"If you really think that my heart is softer than tofu," Lu XiaoFeng casually replied, "then you would be sorely mistaken."

"So if I don't tell you who he is, you'll cut off my nose?" ShangGuan FeiYan looked at him in shock.

"First the nose, then the ears."

ShangGuan FeiYan suddenly smiled sweetly.

"Your talk a tough one, but even I know that in reality you would never go through with it."

"You want to give that a try?" Lu XiaoFeng's face darkened.

"I know that you won't even give it a try, because I know you would never want to have a noseless friend."

"Good thing you are not my friend anymore."

"I know I'm not, but Hua ManLou and Zhu Ting both are."

Lu XiaoFeng's face turned a different color.

"If you cut off my nose, then maybe they won't even get to keep their heads." ShuangGuan FeiYan casually commented. "Wouldn't headless be even uglier than noseless?"

Lu XiaoFeng stared at her. He suddenly burst out in a great laugh.

"You think this is funny?"

"Do you really expect me to believe that you have tricked Hua ManLou again?" Lu XiaoFeng replied in between fits of laughter.

"If I can fool him once, I can fool him again."

"Only idiots can be fooled twice, and he is not an idiot."

"But he is a romantic, a man of emotions, at most you can only trick an idiot twice, but a passionate man could be trick hundreds of times, because he will be falling for it whole heartedly."

"And is Zhu Ting a romantic as well?"

"No, he's too lazy for that."

"There's a good thing about being lazy too."

"Oh?"

"Because if he's so lazy that he doesn't even move, then how in the world could he be tricked by others?"

"It really was quite difficult to trick a person as lazy as he," ShangGuan FeiYan proudly smiled. "But luckily he also has a friend who wrote him a check to get him tricked."

Lu XiaoFeng could not laugh anymore.

"Of course, you don't want to see this good friend of yours lose his head do you?" ShangGuan FeiYan suddenly added. "Not to mention that he would take that pretty wife of his along with him."

"The Boss's Wife is usually even lazier than the Boss," Lu XiaoFeng sighed. "What is she doing coming as well?"

"Because she's sure that you would save her, so she's waiting for you."

"Where is she waiting for me at?"

"You want to know?"

"Very much so.""

"Do you think I would take you there?"

"No!"

"You are wrong," ShangGuan FeiYan smiled. "If I don't intend to take you there, then why would I bring it up?"

"Well at least you won't take me there right now."

"You really are quite smart you know that?" ShangGuan FeiYan smiled sweetly again.

"Pity that my friends aren't too lazy, but are too stupid." Lu XiaoFeng complained to nobody in particular.

"But they are still your friends, so you have to save them."

"I will consider it."

"What's there to consider?"

"I have to see what is it you want me to do in order for you to take me there."

"What I want you to do is really a very simple and easy task."

"And what's that?"

"I only want you to kill someone for me. For you, killing someone should be a pretty easy task."

"Well that depends on who the person that you want me to kill is."

"You can surely handle this person."

"Who?"

"XiMen ChuiXue."

Lu XiaoFeng laughed.

"What do you really want? Me to kill him or him to kill me?"

"Of course I want you to kill him, he insulted me, insulted me like I have never been insulted before."

"And for that little thing, you want to kill him?"

"It doesn't take much for a girl."

"And what if I can't kill him, instead he kills me?"

"Then you don't have to feel too bad either, you'll surely run into a bunch of friends in purgatory."

"Looks like I don't have any choice in this matter."

"None what so ever."

"No matter if he dies or I die, you would end up quite happy."

"To be honest, in my heart, I wouldn't be sad if both of you died."

"Didn't think you actually still have a heart!"

"Of course I do. That's why I hope that you kill him to exchange his one life for the three lives of Hua ManLou and company."

"This little exchange really isn't a bad bargain," Lu XiaoFeng sighed.
"But pity I don't know where he is."

"But you could surely find him."

"How?"

"When he carried Sun XiuQing off that day, he was obviously trying to save her life."

"Other than ending lives, he would occasionally save lives."

"So right now he would surely be at a place where Sun XiuQing could heal her wounds. You should know where around there that she could do that."

"But dead people can't heal."

"Correct!"

"So I have to ask you, after Sun XiuQing had been hit with the Flying Pheonix Needle, could she survive?"

"What hit her was not Flying Pheonix Needles, it was Flying Swallow Needles." ShangGuan FeiYan bitterly replied. "It's supposed to be fatal, but XiMen ChuiXue seemed to be quite an expert."

"Oh?"

"Flying Swallow's poison is different from the normal poisons. Once you were hit by the needles, if you just quietly lay there, then you would surely die."

"That's why Shi XiuYun is dead now." Lu XiaoFeng added for her.

"But XiMen ChuiXue took Sun XiuQing flying all over the mountainside to let the poison dispell out of her body, hence she has a chance now."

"After you injured her that night, you didn't leave did you?"

"How could I, with all you masters there?" ShangGuan FeiYan laughed. "So I just decided to stay there, I saw everyone of you guys jump out trying to chase me."

"Turns out that you have some big balls there!"

"I knew that none of you would have expect that I could have dared to just stay there."

"After we had all left, then you made your presence known."

"By that time there was only Hua ManLou there, he would never suspect me of anything. Even if I tell him that snow is black and ink is white, he would still believe."

"Why?"

"Because he loves me." ShangGuan FeiYan confidently replied. "Once a man falls for a girl, then he becomes really quite hopeless."

"Precisely because he likes you, therefore you think that all the tricks and lies that he falls for is deserved?"

"Because he himself wanted to. I didn't make him love me."

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly sighed again.

"I only have one thing to tell you now."

"What?"

"If a person keeps making everyone else to be idiots, then that person is the dumbest of them all."

"What's that suppose to mean?" ShangGuan FeiYan frowned.

"If you turn around and take a look, then you would understand."

ShangGuan FeiYan turned around. She felt as if she had suddenly completely fallen into a dark and deep hole.

The room was even darker, a person quietly stood in the darkness, completely motionless.

"Hua ManLou!" ShangGuan FeiYan could not stop herself from letting out a startled shout.

But Hua ManLou's demeanor was still very peaceful, as if he was not feeling a bit of pain or rage.

ShangGuan FeiYan looked at him in shock.

"How... how did you get here?"

"I walked." Hua ManLou casually replied.

"But I... I sealed your pressure point."

"When others hit your pressure point, if you can force your body's energy to the area around that point, after a while maybe you could be able to push open that sealed pressure point. Luckily, I know a small bit of that skill."

"You already made preparations? Did you already suspect that I would do something?"

"I didn't want my friend to kill in order to save me."

"Did you hear all of what I just said?"

Hua ManLou nodded.

"You... you... you are not mad?"

"Nobody can avoid making mistakes," Hua ManLou casually replied.
"Besides, you really did not force me to fall for you."

He still looked that serene, that warm, because in his heart there was only love, only love and no hate.

ShangGuan FeiYan looked at him. Even a girl like him could not but feel

regret and guilt.

Lu XiaoFeng was looking at him as well.

"This man really is a good man." He quietly sighed.

Hua ManLou let out a little laugh.

"Good man, stupid man, sometimes there's not much difference at all."

"Where's the Boss?"

"He's keeping the Boss's Wife company, of course."

"Why didn't they come?"

"They are busy listening to Xue-Er's story."

"Looks like it won't be long until they fall for another lie." Lu XiaoFeng cracked an exasperated smile.

Of course, he knew the real reason why they did not come. They were endangered because of him, so when they meet, he would undoubtedly be very embarrassed, and they did not want him to feel embarrassed.

Xue-Er did not want to see her sister either. Under these circumstances, neither would feel pleasant in their hearts if they had met.

ShangGuan FeiYan finally let out a prolonged sigh.

"What you said earlier, I finally understand now."

"Oh?"

"Looks like what I did was truly stupid, stupid to the point of no return."

"Oh!"

"I took all of you to be idiots, but only now do I realize the real idiot is me." She sighed again. "But even if you cut off my nose now, I would never tell you who he is."

"Turns out you are a romantic as well."

ShangGuan FeiYan laughed, it was a very sad and lonely laugh.

"Once a woman falls for a man, then she becomes quite hopeless as well."

"I understand, I understand." Hua ManLou slowly nodded.

"No matter what, I really have wronged you," ShangGuan FeiYan told him in a heavy tone of voice. "Even if you kill me, I won't blame you!"

"But I don't want to kill you."

"Then what do you plan to do to me?"

"Nothing."

"You... you are going to let me go?" ShangGuan FeiYan was startled again.

Hua ManLou did not reply, he suddenly turned around and slowly walked out of the door. Lu XiaoFeng sighed and, incredibly, began to follow him out.

ShangGuan FeiYan was in shock.

"I know what you are trying to do, you know that I would surely go and find him right now, so you let me go on purpose with designs on following me to him." She suddenly shouted.

Lu XiaoFeng did not turn around.

"I don't have to do that." He casually declared.

"Why not?"

"Because I already know who he is!"

ShangGuan FeiYan's expression changed dramatically.

"You know who he is?" She shouted at the top of her lungs. "..... Who is he?"

Lu XiaoFeng did not answer, nor did he say anything. He chased up to Hua ManLou, as the two of them, walking shoulder to shoulder, made their way past the dark hallway and into the pitch black night. The room was pitch black as well.

ShangGuan FeiYan stood alone in the darkness, she suddenly began to shake, was it caused by the cold night? Or was it caused by terror?

The garden was dark but serene, the aroma of the flowers in the wind seemed to be even thicker than it was before the sunset. Several scores of twinkling stars had just arisen, only to be covered up once again by a pale piece of cloud.

Hua ManLou walked very slowly, only when he walked in front of a bush of flowers did he finally, gently, sigh.

"Poor girl."

Lu XiaoFeng nodded, seeming forgetting that Hua ManLou could not see him nod.

"Everyone makes mistakes, even though she did the wrong thing, she...."

Lu XiaoFeng cut him off. "Doing the wrong thing leads to punishment, no matter who, once they have done something wrong, they must suffer the consequences."

"But you let her go."

"Maybe only because I know there is one person who wouldn't let her go."

"Who? Her lover?"

"No, not lover. He is devoid of love."

"Do you really know who he is?"

"No."

"Then was she right? Are you really planning to follow her?"

"I might not be a gentleman, but at least I live up to what I say." Lu XiaoFeng smiled.

"If you don't know who he is, and you are not going to follow her, then are you prepared to let this whole thing go?"

"Can't stop now."

"I don't understand what you are saying."

"I might not be able to find him, but he would certainly come looking for me."

"Are you sure?"

"At least 70% sure."

"Oh?"

"He thinks that I already know who he is, how could he let me live?"

"So just then you said what you said trying to make him come looking for you!"

"I said what I said, also to save ShangGuan FeiYan."

"If you already knew who he is, then he has no need to kill her to keep his identity secret."

Lu XiaoFeng smiled again.

"At least the first one he'd come to look for is me, not ShangGuan FeiYan."

"Too bad he couldn't hear what you just said."

"Yes he could!"

Hua ManLou frowned.

"You think that he was there too just then?"

"He's still there right now."

"Therefore he could appear at any moment, and could try to kill you at any moment."

"Correct."

"But you don't seem too worried at all."

Lu XiaoFeng smiled.

"The best thing about me, is that...."

He did not finish, he suddenly noticed that Hua ManLou's expression changed. Hua ManLou was not an easy person get a reaction out of.

"What's happening?" He could not help but ask.

"Blood!" Hua ManLou replied in a deep voice.

"What blood? Who's blood?"

"I only hope that it's not ShangGuan FeiYan's...."

The blood was ShangGuan FeiYan's. Her throat had been cut, the blood had not stopped flowing.

Her expression was one of shock, rage, and terror, just like the Golden Roc Emperor's expression when he died.

Obviously, she could not believe that her killer could actually kill her either! She could not believe it even in death.

---Was it her lover? Or a man devoid of love? Nobody, only darkness.

The smell of blood in the wind was still very thick.

"He still killed her!" Hua ManLou observed.

"Mm!"

"He obviously did not believe what you said."

"Mm!"

"Now that he's killed ShangGuan FeiYan, there isn't another person in the world who knows who he is."

"Mm."

"So you will never find him."

"I only know that if anyone, no matter who, do something wrong, he has to pay the price." Lu XiaoFeng suddenly declared.

"ShangGuan FeiYan has indeed paid the price," Hua ManLou heavily said. "But what about her killer?"

Her killer had disappeared in the darkness, maybe disappeared forever.

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly grabbed Hua ManLou's hand.

"Where's the Boss?"

The Boss had disappeared. The dungeon that originally had kept them was deserted. An old padauk table had been flipped on its side, the tea pot and cups that were on it were smashed.

"They must have just fought."

"You think that person came and captured Zhu Ting and them?"

"Looks like he's still quite worried about me," Lu XiaoFeng snickered. "So he came and took Zhu Ting and them away to use against me as leverage."

"To be able to capture them this quickly, his kungfu skills is definitely not any worse than yours."

Zhu Ting and the Boss's Wife were not slacks when it comes to martial arts by any means, not to mention that little but devious ShangGuan Xue-Er.

"I didn't expect his kungfu to be worse than mine to begin with."

"There's not that many so skilled in martial arts."

"Therefore, he has made a mistake."

"He shouldn't have gone so far."

"In doing this, he's pretty much admitted his fault as well."

Hua ManLou sighed. "I said it before, everyone makes mistakes."

"If anyone does the wrong thing then he suffer the consequences, there is no exceptions."

The room was quiet like a tomb. Ten men silently sat there, looking at Lu XiaoFeng - Fan Da, Jian Er, the 7 Heroes of the City, and Shan XiYan. Much wine had been consumed, but now all that has ceased.

When friends get together to drink, it should be very difficult to stop before they are drunk. Yet at this moment, they were all very sober. There was not a trace of intoxication on their faces; rather, each one of them had a very peculiar look on their face.

Shan XiYan's expression was the most grave as he stared at Lu XiaoFeng.

"And you think that the mastermind behind this whole thing is him?" He suddenly asked.

Lu XiaoFeng nodded.

"Are you absolutely sure?"

Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"We are friends, and I know the nature of his relationship with all of you. If I wasn't absolutely sure, would I have come here to tell?"

Shan XiYan slammed his tightened fist down onto the table.

"If Huo TianQing really did this, then whatever we had between us are

over! I don't care what kind of relationship I had with him!" He viciously declared.

"But I still do not believe that he was capable of doing such a thing." Fan Da coldly challenged.

"I don't want to believe it either," Lu XiaoFeng replied. "But other than him, I can't think of anyone else."

"Oh?"

"Only he could subdue Zhu Ting and them in an instant."

"If that's all you have, it's not enough." Fan Da snickered.

"Only he could know of the Golden Roc Empire's secret, because he is the person that Yan TieShan trusted the most."

"That's still not enough."

"And only he could get anything good out of this whole matter, once Yan TieShan dies, then Pearl and Diamond Pavilion would be his."

Yan TieShan was just like Huo Xiu, he was also a life-long bachelor. People's suspicion that he was once an eunuch was not without reason.

"Besides," Lu XiaoFeng continued. "Why would a person with his skill

and stature be willing to be the warden for someone like Yan TieShan?"

Even Fan Da could not deny the validity of that point.

"Nobody in the pugilistic world could have suspected that Green Shirt Pavilion's First Pavilion was none other than Pearl and Diamond Pavilion." Lu XiaoFeng added.

"Wait, you think that the First Green Shirt Pavilion is Pearl and Diamond Pavilion?" Shan XiYan's expression noticeably changed at that ascertainment.

Lu XiaoFeng nodded.

"Obviously, the reason that DuGu YiHe had come here was because he found out about this. This is also the reason that Huo TianQing purposefully forced him to expend his energy to make him die under XiMen ChuiXue's sword."

"Sun XiuQing and Shi XiuYun was also killed by ShangGuan FeiYan precisely because they were about to reveal this secret." Hua ManLou had been sitting quietly on the side, but he could no longer stay quiet.

"If they knew about this secret, then how come Man XiuZhen and Yie XiuZhu did not know it?" Shan XiYan inquired.

"They knew as well!" Lu XiaoFeng replied.

"But they are still alive."

"Yie XiuZhu is still alive, but only because she, like ShangGuan FeiYan, had fallen in love with the young and handsome martial arts master Huo TianQing."

"What about Ma XiuZhen?"

"If my guess is correct, then she had probably died under Huo TianQing's hands, it could have even been Yie XiuZhu who killed her."

"And he tried to distract you by telling you about that little pavilion at the back of the mountain to make you go find Huo Xiu." Shan XiYan hypothesised.

Lu XiaoFeng nodded in agreement.

"It didn't matter if I died in that building or if I killed Huo Xiu, this whole matter would have been over and he would have gotten away with it!"

"But he could have never expected that you and that odd hermit would be old friends." Shan XiYan observed.

"He wanted to know how this matter ended, that's why he had instructed Yie XiuZhu to wait outside."

"And he's the only one that knew that you two would go look for Huo Xiu."

Lu XiaoFeng nodded in agreement again.

"But Yie XiuZhu made one slip up." Lu XiaoFeng declared

"What was it?"

"She said that she was there because he had just buried DuGu YiHe and Shi XiuYun."

"DuGu YiHe is a master of a sect, how could you bury him on a random hillside?" Shan XiYan frowned.

"Yie XiuZhu is truly a nice girl in the end." Lu XiaoFeng sighed again.
"She still does not know how to lie."

Shan XiYan sighed as well.

"To lie to a face like yours isn't exactly easy either." He gave an exasperated smile.

"But I did tell her about the secret about the 6 toes, so she immediately went and told Huo TianQing. Pearl and Diamond Pavilion was very close to Huo Xiu's little place to begin with."

"And so only Huo TianQing could have found out about the secret from her so quickly."

"Correct."

"You purposefully leaked this secret to her, or was it an accident?" Shan XiYan wondered.

Lu XiaoFeng did not answer his question directly. He only merely smiled and said: "At the time I didn't think that she should have showed up there. I found that to be a bit odd."

Shan XiYan stared at him, and sighed again.

"You know, your name shouldn't have been XiaoFeng, little phoenix," he laughed. "It should have been little fox!"

Lu XiaoFeng sighed as well.

"But I admire Huo TianQing very much." He let out a worried smile. "He is truly an impeccable planner and very level headed man. If this whole incident was a chess match, then he certainly predicted every move that his opponent was going to take."

"Pity that, in the end, he still made a wrong move." Shan XiYan commented.

"Every man makes mistakes, and he is a human."

"Actually, even if he did not make that last move, you still would have been able to nail him." Fan Da suddenly let out a cold laugh and

observed.

"At least at that time I could not have been so sure!"

"How about now?" Fan Da asked.

"Right now I still am not 100% sure, only about 90%."

"Why did you come to us?" Fan Da inquired.

"You were my friends, and I promised you that I would not fight him."

"And now we are no longer friends?" Fan Da probed further.

"We are still friends, that's why I came."

"To rescind what you said?"

"If anyone does anything wrong, then he has to suffer the consequences, even if he is Huo TianQing!"

"Do you actually expect us to help us kill him!"

"I only want you to inform him that, at tomorrow's sunrise, I'll be waiting for him at Green Breeze outlook!"

"Very well." Fan Da replied. He suddenly stood up and, with razor sharp eyes, stared at Lu XiaoFeng. "If you please."

"Please? Please what?"

"Please, en garde!"

"Don't you believe what I said?"

"I only know that Huo TianQing is the leader of Heaven Hunter Sect, and I just happen to be a disciple of Heaven Hunter Sect...."

"So you...."

"So as long as I, Fan TianYi, is still alive, nobody will trouble Huo TianQing."

Shan XiYan frowned.

"Haven't you heard of the idiom: 'Righteousness before family'?"

"Yes, I have heard of it before," Fan Da coldy replied. "But I forgot it."

"We are bastards who don't know the difference between right and wrong to begin with!" Jian Er slowly stood up as well.

"This type of man deserves to die!" The meat bun vendor suddenly

shouted.

"Correct, very much so." Jian Er replied.

"Pity that I, Bao WuYa, just happen to be this kind of a man as well." The meat bun vendor declared.

"So you deserve to die as well." Jian Er answered.

"Not only deserve to die, but deserve to die right now!"

He suddenly lept up and, like an arrow, flew head first towards the wall. He did not hit the wall but Lu XiaoFeng's chest. Lu XiaoFeng had suddenly moved in front of him.

Still in midair, he did a back flip, kicked his feet against one of the beams on the ceiling, and came crashing down head first onto the stone floor. He still did not hit the floor. Instead he felt a hand gently give a little push against his waist, and before he knew he was steadily standing on the ground, facing that man. The tall man stood straight up with a pale face. Huo TianQing....

Everyone was startled, even Lu XiaoFeng was. Nobody could have dreamed that Huo TianQing would appear at this time and place, nobody could even have imagined that he would have dared to come here. Even though Huo TianQing's face was pale, his expression was still very calm.

"Why... why won't you let me die?" Both of Bao WuYa's fists were clenched tight.

"You deserve to die?" Huo TianQing asked.

Bao WuYa gritted his teeth.

"I deserve to die...."

"Do all of you deserve to die? Do you really want to wipe out all of Heaven Hunter Sect?" Huo TianQing coldly interrogated.

Bao WuYa was too surprised by his question to answer.

"The reason that Heaven Hunter Sect taught you all the kungfu you know was not so that you can all go and kill yourself!"

"But you...." was all Bao WuYa could say.

"But I what? What do I have to do with you?" Huo TianQing snickered. "Even if all of you died, I would not even bat an eye in your direction."

"But just now you...."

"I just didn't want all of you to die because of me, that's all." Huo TianQing cut Bao WuYa off again. "If it gets out that some meat bun vendor died because of me, how would that make me look?"

He suddenly reached into his shirt, took out a bamboo badge, and

snapped it in half.

"I, Huo TianQing, have money and fame, and had long lost interest in being this stupid, poor sect leader job." He coldly declared. "From now on Heaven Hunter Sect and I have nothing between us what so ever. If anyone dares to say that I am still in Heaven Hunter Sect, then I'll make sure to cut off his tongue and break both of his legs."

Bao WuYa looked at him, his eyes turned red. He suddenly Shcollapsed onto the floor, crying his eyes out.

Even Shan XiYan's eyes were getting a little red as well. However, he suddenly threw his head back and let out a hearty laughter.

"Good show, Huo TianQing, so it turns out that your surname is still 'Huo' huh? At least you have not shamed that name."

Huo TianQing did not even look at them as he slowly turned around, and stared directly at Lu XiaoFeng, and Lu XiaoFeng stared directly back at him.

They were facing each other, and staring at each other. Nobody knew how long this lasted. Finally, Lu XiaoFeng let out a long sigh: "Why you? Why did it have to be you?"

"Someone like you would never understand what we do." Huo TianQing coldly replied.

"I understand that you really want to do something incredible,

something amazing. I understand that you don't want to live your whole life underneath the shadow casted by your great father. But this...."

"This is precisely something incredible," Huo TianQing viciously cut him off. "Other than I, Huo TianQing, who could pull off something like this?"

Lu XiaoFeng smiled with an exasperated look: "Nobody else."

"And other than you, there's nobody that could destroy my plan!" He suddenly threw his head back and let out a sigh. "If there is a Huo TianQing in this world, then there should not have been a Lu XiaoFeng!"

"Therefore...."

"Therefore between the two of us, one has to die. But will it you? Or me?"

"We'll probably know by sunrise tomorrow." Lu XiaoFeng sighed as well.

"Dawn will always come morrow, what matter may it be that morrow's matters be settled today?" Huo TianQing snickered. He suddenly flicked his sleeve and he was already outside the door, one could hear his cold and bland voice enminating from a far far place. "At dusk today, I'll wait you outside of Green Breeze Outlook!"

Dusk. Green Breeze Outlook. Green Breeze Outlook was located on top

of a green colored mountain, the mountain side was already on the other side of the setting sun.

Hua ManLou's emotions were obviously very serious as well.

"Huo TianQing has still not arrived!" He observed while letting out a sigh.

"He will."

"I did not think that he was that kind of a person, he shouldn't have been capable to do this kind of thing."

"But he still did." Lu XiaoFeng grimly replied.

"Maybe because he is just too proud, not only does he want to be better than everyone else, he wanted to be better than his own father!"

"Pride is a very idiotic thing to begin with."

If a man is too proud, he would be hard pressed not to do something idiotic.

"And precisely because of that same pride, he is willing to take responsibility for his actions."

Lu XiaoFeng was silent for a long time.

"If you were me, would you let him go?" He suddenly asked.

"I'm not you."

Lu XiaoFeng let out a long and tired sigh. "Luckily you are not me, and luckily I'm not you...."

Hua ManLou did not reply, for at this moment he heard the sound of a door opening. The heavy and ancient front door of Green Breeze Outlook opened slightly. A yellow clothed child servant walked out, carrying a lantern with him. Another man followed behind him. Not Huo TianQing, but a yellow robed Taoist monk. His robe and sleeves were huge, like all robes. His temples were caved in. On that thin but clean face of his was a very grave expression. Even though his steps were light and nimble, he did not look like he practiced martial arts.

He glanced around the area for a moment before walking steadfastly towards Lu XiaoFeng and greeting him with a single-handed open-palmed salute.

"Is this Alm Giver Mr. Lu XiaoFeng?"

{Note: This reference does not mean that the monk thought Lu XiaoFeng was there to make a donation. Taoist and Buddhist monks traditionally have always address anyone who was not a monk as "alm giver."}

Lu XiaoFeng nodded. "And Father is...."

"This humble Taoist goes by the name of Green Maple, I'm the host of this humble outlook."

{Note: The name of the monk and the name of the outlook actually are pronounced the same in Chinese.}

"Could Father be a friend of Huo TianQing?"

"Alm Giver Huo and I are chess mates, every month he would come to this humble outlook for a couple of matches."

{Note: The game the 2 play is actually Go. However, since it just doesn't sound right in English, I changed it to chess, everything still works. Unless I get any objections, I think I'll stick with this.}

"Where is he now?"

A very strange expression crept onto Green Maple's face again.

"The reason that this humble Taoist had came out was to lead Alm-Giver to see him."

"So where is he?"

"He is in this humble Taoist's guest room," Green Maple slowly replied.
"He has been there for quite a long time now."

The yard inside outlook was unusually quiet. The incense burning by the half opened windows diffused into the air as the wind breezed by. The door was half open as well.

Lu XiaoFeng made his way through the yard, as soon as Green Maple to open the door he saw Huo TianQing. But Huo TianQing would never see him.

Huo TianQing had actually died on Father Green Maple's guest bed. On the floor by the guest bed was a jade wine cup decorated with dragons, there were still wine in the cup. Poisonous wine.

Huo TianQing's face was death gray in color. At the corner of his eyes and just below the nose was some slight traces of blood that had not been wiped away. Lu XiaoFeng looked at him, his heart sank.

The look on Father Green Maple's face was one of utter melancholy.

"When he showed up, I had assumed that he came to finish the match that we did not finish yesterday," He gravely explained. "I was quite interested in seeing what new idea he had came up with to save this match. But instead he said he wasn't in the mood to play today."

"He only wanted to drink." Lu XiaoFeng guessed.

Green Maple nodded. "That was when I noticed that his attitude seems strange, as if there was something heavy that's weighing on his heard. He was also sighing endlessly and mumbling to himself."

"What did he say?"

"He seemed to be saying something like the hundred year life of man went by in a blink of an eye, and also that if there was already a Huo TianQing in this world, why did it must also have a Lu XiaoFeng."

Lu XiaoFeng smiled a sad smile through his frown.

"Was this wine yours?" He had to ask.

"The wine is indeed of this place, but the cup he had brought on his own. He's always been obsessed about cleanliness and would never use anything anyone else has used before."

Lu XiaoFeng picked up the cup and sniffed its edges.

"The poison is definitely on the cup." He frowned.

"He picked up the cup but put it back down several times, just like when met with a difficult chess move to make, as if he could not make up his mind. I was just about to ask him when he suddenly threw his head back, let out three laughs, and drank the wine."

The troubled Taoist put his hands together in front of him in prayer.

"I could not imagine that one so young as he would see through the hopelessness of life, I pray that he reach the way soon." His voice was

getting quieter and quieter, there seemed to be tears swelling up in his eyes.

Lu XiaoFeng was quiet, his heart was even heavier. After a long time, he finally sighed. "Did he bring up anybody else?"

"No."

"And he did mention the name Zhu Ting at all?"

"No."

Lu XiaoFeng's heart sank even deeper under its own weight.

On the side of the bed was an unfinished game of chess. "Life is ever changing, just like the clouds in the sky," Green Maple mumbled to himself, "but who could have expected that even though the unfinished game is here, he is no longer."

"He played the black pieces?" Lu XiaoFeng suddenly asked.

"I always let him go first."

Lu XiaoFeng picked up a piece, thought deeply, and slowly played a move.

"I'll finish this game for him."

Green Maple smiled in sadness. "If you make that move, then won't black lose?"

"But other than this, he had no other move to make."

"He had lost this game already, he knew that too, but it's just he could not bring himself to admit it."

Lu XiaoFeng stared out toward the horizon. "But he still lost," he mumbled. "This game is just like life, one wrong move and you lose."

Father Green Maple suddenly swiped the board with his sleeve and knocked all of the pieces off.

"Isn't life just like a game too? Why take winning and losing so seriously?" He slowly asked.

"If you don't take it seriously, then why play this game to begin with?"

Father Green Maple shot a look at him before slowly closing his eyes and bringing his two hands together in prayer again. He did not say anything more. A gust of wind blew open a window, the dark night was already covering the world.

Lu XiaoFeng laid in his bed, staring at the wine cup on his chest. This

cup had been laying on his chest for a very long time, even now he still hasn't drank it. It seemed as if he was not in the mood for even a drink.

"Still thinking about Zhu Ting and them?" Hua ManLou asked. Lu XiaoFeng silently admitted it.

"When a man is about to die, his heart would turn kind. Since Huo TianQing had already decided to die, then he probably did not want to do any more wrongs and kill people. Maybe they are already safely home by now."

Not only did he say this to comfort Lu XiaoFeng, he said it to comfort himself. But Lu XiaoFeng looked as if he did not hear it at all.

Hua ManLou forced a smile onto his face. "No matter what, you have won this game."

Lu XiaoFeng replied with a long, drawn out sigh.

"But the last move was not one made by me."

"And it was not played the way you wanted it too either was it?"

"No." He forced a pathetic smile on his face as well. "That's why even though I had won, it feels even worse than if I had lost."

Hua ManLou could not help but let out a drawn out sigh as well.

"Why wasn't he willing to finish playing this unfinished game?"

"Because he knew that he had lost," Lu XiaoFeng answered, "just like how he was not willing to finish that game yesterday either---"

As soon as he finished this sentence, he suddenly jumped up off the bed, the wine cup that was resting on his chest fell onto the ground and was instantly smashed to pieces.

Hua ManLou knew that he had never allowed his wine cup to be smashed. But right now he seemed to have completely forgotten about that. He stood there in complete and utter disbelief, his whole body, from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet, felt ice cold

Hua ManLou did not ask him anything, he knew he would say it himself soon enough.

"He didn't finish that game yesterday either." Lu XiaoFeng suddenly repeated the same idea.

"Yes."

"He was still playing chess at Green Breeze Outlook yesterday." By now, even the color on Hua ManLou's face changed.

"If ShangGuan FeiYan had died in his hands, how could he be playing chess here yesterday?"

ShangGuan FeiYan was hundreds of miles away, even if Huo TianQing had grown wings, there was no way he could have made it back in one day. ShangGuan FeiYan had died only yesterday.

Hua ManLou felt his hands and feet go ice cold as well.

"Did we mistakenly accuse him?" Hua ManLou sighed.

"At least, he didn't kill ShangGuan FeiYan." Lu XiaoFeng's fists were clenched.

Hua ManLou nodded.

"At least for that, we were wrong in accusing him."

"Why didn't he argue for his innocence?"

"The reason why he had arranged to meet me at Green Breeze Outlook was probably to ask that Taoist to prove his alibi, that he was playing chess there yesterday."

"Because he knew that if it was just his words without any proof, you would never have believed him."

"But he didn't even have the chance to argue for his innocence."

"Then, there was no way that he could have killed himself."

"Absolutely none."

"Then who killed him."

"The one who killed ShangGuan FeiYan as well."

"The real master mind behind all of this?"

"That's right."

"Was Father Green Maple bribed by this guy to lie for him?"

"Monks are still human."

"If that's the case, the Father Green Maple must surely know who he is!"

Lu XiaoFeng sighed at that remark. "So right now I only hope that Green Maple is still alive."

He was disappointed. By the time they made it back to Green Breeze Outlook, the outlook had turned into a sea of flames. Nobody could have escaped, not a single person. The fire has no compassion, the person who set the fire had even less. Who was this person?

Green Breeze Outlook was on one side of the mountain, Huo Xiu's little pavilion was on the other side. Even though one side of the mountain had been engulfed in a sea of fire, the other side was still peaceful and quiet.

"PUSH". That word was still on the front door. Lu XiaoFeng pushed open the door and walked in. This was the second time he pushed open this door, and could very be his last.

The belly of the hallow mountain was empty, there was nothing in it. All those countless treasure and weapons had miraculously disappeared.

In the middle of the room was a small stone platform, on it was a dirty and old straw mat. Huo Xiu, barefoot, wearing that bluish-green shirt that had been washed white, sat cross-legged on that mat, warming up his wine. Such deliciously smelling wine.

Lu XiaoFeng took a deep whiff of the smell and walked to the bottom of the stone staircase.

"Seems like I arrived just in time again." He smiled.

Huo Xiu smiled back. "This time I'm not surprised anymore. Everytime I have good wine you would suddenly appear!"

"But now I'm a bit suspicious."

"Suspicious of what?"

"Suspicious that you might be purposefully luring me here with good wine as bait."

Huo Xiu burst out laughing. "Well in any case, good wine is still good wine. If you are not afraid of getting your cloth dirty, then you could sit down and have a cup."

"I am afraid."

"You are afraid?" Huo Xiu frowned.

"But what I'm not afraid of getting my cloth dirty."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

"I'm afraid that I'll end up like Huo TianQing and have to wait for someone else to come along and finish my unfinished game for me."

Huo Xiu stared at him, his eyes suddenly seemed to have turned into a pair of just unsheathed razor sharp sabres. He did not say another word, instead he slowly poured a cup of wine and slowly drank it. Lu XiaoFeng did not say another word as well, he knew that one sentence was enough. He was talking to a smart man, with a smart man, just one sentence was enough.

After an extended period of time, Huo Xiu suddenly burst out laughing again.

"Looks like I still can't fool you."

"So you might as well stop trying to altogether."

"How did you know it was me?"

"I couldn't," Lu XiaoFeng sighed. "There was no way for me to realize that I had been mistaken from the very beginning."

"Oh!"

"I had always thought that you were on the same boat as Yan TieShan and DuGu, that you were also a victim, and I had always thought that only Huo TianQing could benefit from this whole matter."

"How about now?"

"Now I have it all figured out. There is only one person that could really benefit from this whole matter."

"And that one person is me."

"That's right, that one person is you!"

Huo Xiu filled his wine cup again.

"Once the Golden Roc Emperor dies, nobody in the world would ever

bring up your duty to the Golden Roc Empire anymore." Lu XiaoFeng continued.

"He wouldn't have brought it up anyways," Huo Xiu slowly nodded. "But recently he was really getting rather poor. He is very good at spending money, but he never knew about the hardships of actually earning money."

"So you had to kill him?"

"This type of person deserves to die to begin with!" Huo Xiu coldly concluded.

"But his death wasn't enough was it? Because DuGu and Yan TieShan was going to come and split the money weren't they?"

"This money is mine originally, and only I spent all that energy and effort protecting it, making it grow day by day, I would never let anyone else get a piece of it!"

"So they deserved to die too?"

"They had to die!"

"In truth, this money was enough to last 30 men an entire lifetime," Lu XiaoFeng sighed. "At your age, do you really plan on taking it all to your grave with you?"

Huo Xiu stared at him.

"If you had a wife, would you be willing to share her with other people? You aren't using her during the day anyways." He coldly rebuked.

"That's completely different."

"To me, these two matters are the same. This treasure is like my wife to me, no matter if I'm alive or dead, I would never share it with anybody else!"

"So therefore, you first used Huo TianQing and ShangGuan FeiYan to kill the Golden Roc Emperor, and then used me to get rid of DuGu YiHe and Yan TieShan."

"I didn't want to get you involved, but other than you, I really couldn't think of anyone else who could do this."

"That's not the first time I heard that sentence." Lu XiaoFeng smiled embarrassingly.

"It's the truth."

"I took your bait because I wanted too. But what about Huo TianQing? How could you get to a person like him?"

"It wasn't me who got to him."

"ShangGuan FeiYan?"

Huo Xiu smiled. "Don't you think that she's a girl that's quite capable of moving a man's heart?"

A wry smile appeared on Hua ManLou's face.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed as well.

"And how did you get to her?"

"I might be an old man, but I can still tempt any girl." Huo Xiu casually replied. "Because I have something that no woman can refuse."

"What's that?"

"My riches." He smiled and went on matter of factly. "There isn't a woman in the world who doesn't love riches, just like there isn't a man in the world who doesn't love beautiful woman."

"You promised to split a portion of your treasure to her to get her to seduce Huo TianQing?"

"You all thought that her lover was Huo TianQing, bet you didn't expect that the one that she actually loved was this old man did ya?" Huo Xiu laughed out loud.

"She wasn't in love with you, she was in love with your money." Lu XiaoFeng could not fight off the urge to correct him.

"Doesn't make a difference to me," Huo Xiu was still laughing. "Either way, to me she was a dead person to begin with."

"You had planned to kill her to keep her quiet from the beginning?"

"I told you, I would never let anyone else share my riches with me."

"So you purposefully told me the secret about the 6 toes to send me to deal her."

"But Huo TianQing still didn't know what was going on, and actually sent her the message telling her this secret with his pigeons."

"Even he didn't know that you were the master mind behind all of this?"

"Of course not, why else would he be so willing to go through all of this for ShangGuan FeiYan?"

"But not even you could have predicted that I would let ShangGuan FeiYan go."

"Therefore I had to go and do it myself."

"Huo TianQing was no dummy, when he heard that news that

ShangGuan FeiYan had died, he must have knowns that there was someone else behind the scenes. Therefore once he arranged the meeting at Green Breeze Outlook with me, he came here to see you."

"He really wasn't that stupid, pity that even smart people have stupid moments."

"He really should not have come to you all by himself." Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"That's why he deserved to die too."

"You moved him to Green Breeze Outlook after you killed him?"

"The deed of Green Breeze Outlook is mine as well, I could have taken it back anytime I felt like."

"That's why when you asked Father Green Maple to lie for you, he could not refuse could he?"

"A monk that was capable of lying? Obviously he deserved to die as well!" Huo Xiu casually concluded.

"You wanted me to believe that Huo TianQing had committed suicide out of guilt and stop meddling in this whole affair didn't you?"

"I truthfully did not want you to be involved anymore," Huo Xiu sighed. "But it's a shame that wordy Taoist did you in."

"He did me in?"

"When I heard him mentioning about that unfinished game yesterday, I knew that you would realize that inconsistency sooner or later."

"So you just decided that you might as well set the entire Green Breeze Outlook on fire."

"I just happened to have something else in mind planned for that piece of land."

"In your eyes, are those people actually just the same as that piece of land? Nothing more than tools that you use and throw away as you please."

"So when I wanted them to be alive, they'll live; when I wanted them to die, then they must die!"

"How did you figure out how you were going to use me?" Lu XiaoFeng asked with a tired smile.

"Every man has a weakness, once you figure out where their weak spot is, you can use anybody."

"What's my weakness?"

"Your weakness is that you loved to meddle in other people's affairs way

too much!" Huo Xiu coldly answered.

"That's how I ended up being your accomplice, getting XiMen ChuiXue involved for you, helping you get rid of Yan TieShan and DuGu YiHe...." Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"And you did very well through all of it. Had you been willing to stop after Huo TianQing had died, you would have been welcomed to come and have a drink with me whenever you liked, if you run into any kind of trouble, I might actually have been willing to lend you ten thousand taels of so to get yourself out of it."

"Pity that I didn't stop."

Huo Xiu sighed as well.

"Do you know why I had moved all the stuff in here away?" Lu XiaoFeng did not know.

"Because I planned to leave this place for you to use as your tomb."

"At least it's not a small tomb." Lu XiaoFeng tried a rather pathetic joke.

"For Lu XiaoFeng, being buried underneath the First Pavilion of Green Shirt Pavilion is actually pretty fitting don't you think?" Huo Xiu observed matter of factly.

"At least ShangGuan FeiYan did say one sentence of truth," Lu XiaoFeng

sighed. "The First Pavilion of Green Shirt Pavilion really was here."

"Pity, though. The more people tell you that the First Pavilion of Green Shirt Pavilion was here, the less you believed them."

"And you, obviously, must be the Master Helmsman of the 108 Pavilions of Green Shirt Pavilion aren't you?"

"Master Helmsman, those words sound so nice," Huo Xiu smiled. "I love hearing those words."

"Do they sound better than the sound of you counting money?"

"I don't count money," Huo Xiu casually replied. "You can't count how much money I have anyways."

Lu XiaoFeng sighed again. "Only now do I really understand how you got to be so rich."

"You might understand now, but pity you'll never master it."

"Only because I really don't see the point in taking it all to the grave with me."

Huo Xiu burst out laughing again. "Good, very good!"

"What's so good about it?"

"Rumors say that you would always have a very thick stack of banknotes on you and that everytime you never put anything less than 5000 taels on the table each time." Huo Xiu said, smiling.

"That particular 5000 tael banknote has probably already ended up in your hands." Lu XiaoFeng let out an exasperated smile.

"Since you don't plan on taking money to the grave with you, I'll make sure to take all that money out for you after you died."

"You want a dead man's money?"

"I want any and all kinds of money, that's one of the biggest secrets in getting rich."

"Pity I'm still alive."

"But you are already in your grave."

"Are you certain that you can kill me?"

"No, but I am certain that you will die here."

"Oh!"

"Once someone has entered their grave, there isn't any hope for them

to get out."

Lu XiaoFeng looked at Huo Xiu, his eyes suddenly shone like a pair of razor sharp knife.

"Your hands getting a little itchy for action?" Huo Xiu smiled.

"Yes, they are." Lu XiaoFeng admitted.

"Too bad I'm not interested in fighting you, I never liked to get my own hands dirty." He gently pressed down on the stone platform with his hand. "Boom!" A huge steel cage actually fell down from above, trapping the entire stone platform inside of it.

Lu XiaoFeng frowned.

"Since when did you decide to turn into a bird and put yourself inside a cage?"

"You find this funny?"

"It is funny."

"You won't think it's so funny when I walk out of here, a man about to die from starvation will be hard pressed to find anything funny."

"Am I about die from starvation?"

"After I leave, the only thing you can eat here would be the flesh on you and your friend's bodies, the only thing you can drink here would be your own blood." Huo Xiu coldly replied.

"But how can you leave?"

"The only exit in this entire place is precisely beneath this stone platform I'm sitting on. And I can assure you, I would make sure to remember to seal this exit on my way out."

The color on Lu XiaoFeng's face changed a bit.

"I don't seem to remember us getting in here that way." He forced a smile on his face.

"That door you entered from could only be opened from the outside, and nobody outside will open it for you, that I can also assure you."

"What else can you assure me of?"

"I can also assure you that you will die of thirst within ten days. However, I'm a very prudent man, so I would make sure to at least wait ten more days before coming back."

"You are coming back?"

"Of course I'm coming back," Huo Xiu laughed, "coming back to take all

that money that's on you."

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly laughed, a big and hearty laugh.

"If I was you, I would not be laughing right now." Huo Xiu told him matter of factly.

"You are not me."

"Fortunately I'm not."

"And precisely because you are not me, you don't know that the only thing I have left in my pocket is one huge hole." Lu XiaoFeng said, trying to contain his laughter.

"Seems like you are determined not to let me get anything out of you even in death." Huo Xiu sighed.

You are finally getting it."

"Luckily, there's still some thing I can get out of this."

"Oh!"

"I can still at least take off the clothes on your body and sell them somewhere for a couple of farthings at least!"

"You are willing to go through all of that for a couple of farthings?"

"A farthing is still money."

"As long as it's money you want it!"

"Money is always good, one farthing is at least better than no farthing at all."

"Alright, let me give you some!" Lu XiaoFeng suddenly flicked out his hand and a dozen or so chains of bronze coins were sent screaming towards Huo Xiu.

Huo Xiu did not move nor did he dodge. Only when the chains of coins penetrated the vertical bars of his cage did he wave his hand around a couple of times and all 12 of the chains of coins suddenly ended up in the palm of his hand.

The excellence of skill of this old man's hand startled even Lu XiaoFeng.

"Excellent move!" He exclaimed despite of himself.

Huo Xiu had already carefully put away those 12 chains of coin.

"When there's money to be made, my kungfu would always be exceptionally good."

"Pity that that skill of yours is still a bit worse than mine."

Huo Xiu let out a laugh. "Are you trying to bait me to go out there and fight you?"

"Yes, I had that in mind."

"Then I advice you to get that out of your mind."

"You are never going to come out?"

"Even if I wanted to, I can't."

"Why not?"

"This cage is made from steel that has been forged over 100 times. It weighs 990 kilograms. Even blades that cut through steel like butter might not even cut through it, nevermind that those kinds of swords only exists in legend."

"And nobody could hope to lift up a 990 kilogram cage either," Lu XiaoFeng added.

"Nobody."

"Therefore not only can you not come out, I cannot get in either."

"So all you can do is watch me leave, and then wait to die of starvation."

"The reason you put yourself in a cage to start with was that you are afraid that I might try and get in a fight with you?"

"I'm an old man, I'm not even interested in getting in bed with women anymore, much less fighting."

Lu XiaoFeng patted Hua ManLou on the shoulder. "Looks like the only we can do is to wait here for death!" He sighed.

"This looks to be his final move!" Hua ManLou casually replied. Unbelievably, he actually smiled.

"You have to admit, this move is quite an effective move."

"But we still have a move to make, there is a piece that we haven't used yet."

"Oh!"

"Did you forget about Zhu Ting?" Hua ManLou asked.

Lu XiaoFeng smiled.

"Of course not."

"And that's the reason you are still able to smile even now." Hua ManLou smiled in return.

"And that's why you are not anxious at all either."

"He shouldn't have brought Zhu Ting here to begin with."

"That is so very true."

There seemed to be some changes on Huo Xiu's face.

"What about him?" He finally succumbed to temptation and asked.
"Why shouldn't he be here?"

"Nothing about him really." Lu XiaoFeng nonchalantly answered. "Just that there isn't a place in this world that has been able to lock him up."

"He doesn't have any good points about him really, other than the fact that he happens to be a personal apprentice of Master Lu." Hua ManLou added.

"Master Lu?" Huo Xiu frowned.

"Of course, you already know that Master Lu is the direct descendent of Lu Ban, and also is the best handyman in the world." Hua ManLou explained.

"After Master Lu died, that title obviously fell to none other than The Boss, Zhu Ting." Lu XiaoFeng added.

"Therefore, as long as he's here, then you are sure to be able to get out." Huo Xiu concluded.

"That's right." Lu XiaoFeng concurred.

"He really is here."

"I know."

"Just a bit further, where you saw me last time."

"I know."

"If there isn't a place in the world that can keep him locked up, then why hasn't he come out yet?"

"He will."

"Well even if he comes out now, it will be too late." Huo Xiu snickered to himself.

"Oh!"

"The master control of all of the machines and gadgets in here is right

below where I'm sitting."

"Oh!"

"Of course, while I'm leaving, I'll make sure to immediately destroy it."

"And then what happens?"

"And then every exist out of this place would immediately be sealed off by boulders, every boulder weighing more than 4 tons, so...."

"So we are doomed to die in here."

"Not just you, even if Lu Ban was resurrected, all he could do is wait to die." Huo Xiu casually added.

"And therefore you are leaving right now!"

"I had wanted to wait and chat with you guys a little while longer, because I know that waiting for death isn't all that pleasant."

"But now you have changed your mind?"

"Correct!"

"Looks like not only could I not keep you, I can't send you on your way either." Lu XiaoFeng joked, in a rather pathetic attempt to be funny.

"But you will definitely miss me very soon, that I know," Huo Xiu said with a smile as he reached out with his hand. "All I have to do is press down, and I would disappear. You'll never see me again."

He pressed down with his hand. However, he did not disappear, but the smile on his face has.

That square stone platform still remained a square stone platform. He had been sitting squarely on top of it, now he still remained sitting squarely on top of it. The expression on his face was as if he suddenly got hit directly on the nose by someone.

Huge beads of sweat suddenly appeared on his forehead.

Lu XiaoFeng seemed to find all of this quite odd as well. He knew Huo Xiu very well, this old fox would never ever do anything that he was not completely sure and confident of. If Huo Xiu said that there was an exit underneath this platform, then there must be an exit underneath the platform. But now it seemed as if the exit had suddenly disappeared.

"Why are you still here?" Lu XiaoFeng blinked.

Huo Xiu's fists were clenched.

"You... you...." He did not finish his sentence before fainting.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed, then suddenly discovered that he wasn't the only

one sighing. The ones who sighed was not Hua ManLou, but ShangGuan Xue-Er and the Boss's Wife. They sighed as they walked over to him, with flowery smiles on their faces.

"Turns out you are right, this guy really did have an ace up his sleeve." ShangGuan Xue-Er was the first to speak.

"That's why he's the one and only Lu XiaoFeng!" The Boss's Wife's smile was even sweeter.

But Lu XiaoFeng's smile was a rather pathetic one.

"The reason that you didn't come out was to see if I still had an ace up my sleeve?"

"We didn't think that there was nothing that you could have done to this old fox, but who knew that you still had this one last move left?" ShangGuan Xue-Er sweetly answered.

"This last move of yours is truly quite something else." The Boss's Wife giggled.

"He made this cage himself, but he probably never would have dreamed that he would actually be trapped in it." ShangGuan Xue-Er observed.

Lu XiaoFeng cracked a smile as well. "This is what's called, 'Kindly Step into the Vat'"

{Note: "Kindly Step into the Vat" is a well known Chinese idiom. It originated from a story regarding a conversation between two officials of the only female Emperor in Chinese history, Wu ZeTian. Both officials were infamous for their cruelty towards the subjects of their interrogations. When the first official was suspected of treason, the second official was sent to interrogate. The second official, being friend with the first official, invited him to dinner that night. During the dinner, the second official claimed to have this one particularly stubborn subject who will not cooperate no matter what and sought the first official for advice. The first official suggested that the best thing to do was to use a large vat filled with oil, heat it to a boil in front of him, and then threaten to throw him in the vat if he does not confess. The second official then promptly ordered his servants to bring a large vat filled with oil into the room and heat it to a boil. Once that was done, the host stood up, charged his guest with his crimes, and asked him to "kindly step into the vat" if he does not confess. His guest, the first official, promptly confessed. Therefore this idioms applies to when people's own designs and plans comes back to work on themselves. Now that we are finished with our history listen, back to the story.}

The Boss's Wife stared at him, her eyes twinkled. "How did you ever think of and pull off this?"

"I have always been a genius." Lu XiaoFeng replied matter of factly.

"Did you figure out that he was going to try and escape using that way and therefore sealed it off before he came in here?" ShangGuan Xue-Er inquired.

Lu XiaoFeng was quiet.

"Well? Why aren't you talking?" The Boss's Wife demanded. "How did you do it?"

Lu XiaoFeng suddenly shook his head.

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?" ShangGuan Xue-Er asked.

"Everyone needs to keep a couple of secrets to themselves just in case, especially when women like you two are involved." Lu XiaoFeng said with a smile, a smile quite a bit like a crafty old fox. "If you two learn all of my secrets, then how could I possibly survive the rest of my days?"

"So how did you do it?" Once everybody had left, Hua ManLou could no longer resist the temptation to ask any longer. "Why won't you tell them?"

Lu XiaoFeng's answer was especially clever.

"Because I don't know either."

"You don't know why that exit would suddenly be sealed either?" Hua ManLou was shocked.

"No idea."

Hua ManLou was speechless.

"Maybe it was because the set up suddenly malfunctioned, or maybe it was because a rat had accidentally wandered into and popped a spring here or there...." Lu XiaoFeng suggested, there was a look of deep contemplation in his eyes. He sighed. "What was really the reason? Nobody knows, maybe only Heaven knows."

"Only Heaven knows?"

Lu XiaoFeng nodded.

"Do you know why evil doers always fail at the last hurdle?" He asked.

"No idea."

"Because Heaven has already prepared a last master stroke waiting there for them, so no matter how clever their plan was, it would always fail."

"So this last move was not yours but the will of Heaven?"

"Correct."

Hua ManLou laughed.

"Why are you laughing? You don't believe me?"

"Do you actually think I would believe you?" Hua ManLou asked, still laughing.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed and answered with a pathetic smile of his own.

"Why is it when I tell the truth, nobody ever believes me?"

Epilogue

The door leading to the stone steps had been opened, Zhu Ting opened it. If someone could create a door like that, then there would be someone who could open it.

There is a lot of things like that in the world. That's why if you could really produce a shield that can't be penetrated by any spears, then someone else would have made a spear that could penetrate your shield. There is no such things as "absolute" in this world.

Lu XiaoFeng sat on the steps, looking at Huo Xiu inside the cage. He suddenly got the feeling that the cage was quite a bit like a prison cell.

When someone does something wrong, the he must suffer the consequences. Lu XiaoFeng sighed. He felt quite satisfied with how this matter has ended. So how did this matter end?

The Boss was busy using a wooden triangle to measure the height of this cave. The Boss's Wife was at his side, looking at him. She knew that he has gotten another brilliant idea, but she did not ask. She knew that not a man in the world who likes to be interrupted by a talkative woman while he is thinking.

"Is that man going to leave?" But Zhu Ting suddenly asked her.

"Mmhmm!"

"And you are not going to see him on his way?"

"If you are going to, then I'll be going to as well."

"He doesn't seem to want me to send him off." Zhu Ting coldly observed.

"And you don't want to go send him off either do you?"

Zhu Ting admitted it.

"But if he would ever need your help, just randomly send a person here with a message and you would immediately go to help."

"That's only because I know if I ever needed his help, he would come too."

"But even then there would be no greetings, no talking to each other."

"Coming or not is one matter, speaking or not is a completely different matter altogether."

"There probably isn't another pair of friends like you two in this entire world." She sighed.

Zhu Ting put down the wooden triagle in his hand and stared at her.

"I have decided to stay here."

"I know."

"Can you stand to stay at a place like this?"

"As long as you can, I can."

"I won't fault you if you don't want to stay here."

"You want to chase me away so that little devil can keep you company?"
The Boss's Wife stared at him viciously.

"Since when did you become capable of jealousy?" Zhu Ting joked.

"Just now."

"Just now?"

"Just now, what did that little devil say to you?"

"A secret, of course." Zhu Ting smiled.

"What secret?" The Boss's Wife was staring at him viciously again.

"I'll tell you later, but now...." Zhu Ting casually answered. "Now you can go and say goodbye to him."

"I'm not going to."

"Why not?"

The Boss's Wife bit her lip. "From this day forth, I'll never ever take my eyes off of you, no matter what. Because...."

"Because of what?"

The Boss's Wife looked at him, those beautiful eyes of hers were full of love.

"Because only now do I realize how great a man you are, I'm afraid that others might steal you away." She said tenderly.

Lu XiaoFeng was observing them from afar, and suddenly sighed.

"Looks like their troubles are behind them."

"What kind of trouble were they in?" Hua ManLou asked.

"For the last couple of yaers, the Boss's Wife seemed to have been a little disappointed at the Boss, I was worried that they might become an estranged couple."

"Did the Boss's Wife feel that the Boss was a bit too lazy?"

"But by now she should know what an incredible genius her husband is." Lu XiaoFeng smiled.

"If it wasn't for him, we probably would have all died in here." Hua ManLou agreed.

Every woman wishes that she could be proud of her husband.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed again.

"I'm not afraid of much, but it looks like starvation really is quite something else."

He was looking inside the cage at Huo Xiu. But Huo Xiu's eyes were bulging out as he looked at ShangGuan Xue-Er just outside of the cage.

Xue-Er had in her hand a sausage and two biscuits, talking to Huo Xiu in what sounded like gibberish from so far away to Lu XiaoFeng.

Huo Xiu was so angry by now that his neck looked bulged out. He suddenly jumped up and charged at the cage, trying to knock it over. Of course, he failed. He had especially made the cage so that nobody could knock it over.

Xue-Er stood outside the cage, coldly looking at him. She looked like

she was about to walk away when Huo Xiu called her back. The two of them exchanged some more words. Huo Xiu let out an exhausted sigh, wrote something down on a piece of paper, and handed it to Xue-Er in change for the sausage and biscuits. Then he immediately sat down on the ground and devoured the food.

"He still would rather die than tell us where that money went?" Hua ManLou suddenly asked.

"He's not scared of death."

"Because he really believes that being poor is worse than death?" Hua ManLou let out an exasperated laugh.

"But he might have just discovered something even scarier than being poor." Lu XiaoFeng laughed in return.

"Hunger?"

Lu XiaoFeng had not replied yet when Xue-Er came prancing over, there was light in her eyes.

"I just sold one sausage and two biscuits to him," she laughed. "Can you guess how much I sold them for?"

They could not.

"Fifty-thousand taels, a whole 50 thousand!" Xue-Er proudly waved the

banknote in her hand. "I can take this note, written by him, to whichever bank I want to, whenever I want to, and cash it in."

Lu XiaoFeng could not help but laugh.

"Your heart is pretty black, you know that?"

"I doubt you'll find a more expensive sausage anywhere in the world." Hua ManLou jokingly observed.

"That's why that old fox over there was almost insane with rage, but pity he had to make the deal." Xue-Er explained.

"Starvation really is quite something else." Hua ManLou sighed.

"Are you actually planning to get all of his money this way?" Lu XiaoFeng inquired.

"That money was my family's to begin with, don't forget that my surname is ShangGuan too."

"Even if you manage to steal 50 thousand taels of silver from him everyday, you won't empty him out for at least another year or two." Lu XiaoFeng laughed.

"Then I'll stay here and steal for 3 years, however long it takes. Besides, I got company."

"The Boss has already decided to stay here?"

Xue-Er nodded, a mysterious smile crept up on her face. "He told his wife that he wanted to stay here to create a couple of truly incredible things. But only I know why he really decided to stay."

"And what's that reason."

"That's a secret." Xue-Er blinked, the smile on her face grew even more mysterious.

"What's the secret?"

"If it's a secret, then why should I tell you?"

Lu XiaoFeng stared at her face for a long time before suddenly cracking a smile. "I'm not that interested in your secret, but I am a little worried."

"Worried about what?"

"When you cash in this bank note, won't people be inquiring about where you got it from?"

"Absolutely nobody would ask me."

"Oh?"

"Don't forget how strange and mysterious of a man this old fox was, even his most trusted underlings don't know what he's up to most of the time, he's always done things this way."

"Looks like his own plan has come back to bite him again." Lu XiaoFeng sighed.

"Of course," Xue-Er laughed. "If it wasn't because of him, it would nearly be this easy for me to squeeze money out of him."

A man's fate is nothing more than his own creation, that is why the most straight forward and honest person always have the best luck.

Still smiling, Lu XiaoFeng slowly stood up. "Then you go ahead and stay here and get all the money you can out of him, while you are at it could you get a couple of jugs of wine out of him for me?"

"Are... are you going to leave now?" Xue-Er stared at him.

"It I was to stay in this kind of place, I'll be shocked if I don't die of boredom before three days is up." Lu XiaoFeng laughed.

"Don't you want to ask me about my secret?"

"No."

Xue-Er's eyes rolled around from a bit. She suddenly broke out into a smile. "Actually, telling you won't do much harm, you'll find out sooner or

later anyways."

Lu XiaoFeng did not seem to object.

"The reason he is staying here is because he has fallen in love with me and I have also fallen in love with him."

Lu XiaoFeng laughed.

"I know you don't believe me," Xue-Er continued casually. "But when I marry him, then you'd have to believe it."

"You are marrying him?" Lu XiaoFeng could not help but ask. "Then what about the Boss's Wife?"

"Why must a boss have only one boss's wife?" Xue-Er asked matter of factly. "If you can have four eyebrows, why can't Boss have two Boss's Wives?"

The side of the mountain was underneath the sitting sun, Lu XiaoFeng walked along the mountainside. He was not uttering a solitary sound. After walking for a long time, he suddenly broke the silence.

"That little devil must be lying once again."

"Mmhmm!" Hua ManLou concurred.

"The Boss isn't crazy, why would he take a little devil like her to be the Little Boss's Wife?"

"Of course he won't."

Lu XiaoFeng quietly walked for another while.

"But the Boss is an a\$\$hole, sometimes he could get a little crazy." He suddenly spoke up again.

"And the little boss's wives are often little devils as well."

"So it's best that you hurry and go back to try and talk that a\$\$hole out of this insane idea."

"Why don't you go yourself?"

"You know that he and I aren't on speaking terms."

"If this whole matter was not true to begin with, then won't the Boss think that we are a couple of nut cases?"

"What's the harm in being a nut case once in a while?"

"Looks like anyone who is your friend can't help but catch your illness and get a little crazy in the head eventually." Hua ManLou sighed.

And he went, he had too.

Lu XiaoFeng, like an idiot, sat on the side of the path and waited. Luckily this path was very remote, other than a granny who was trying to pick some wild fruits, nobody else passed by. He did not have to wait for too long before Hua ManLou returned.

"Well?" Lu XiaoFeng asked immediately.

"You are nuts, and I am too." Hua ManLou put up a serious face.

"This whole thing was untrue?"

"They did have a secret, Zhu Ting has adopted Xue-Er as his daughter."

Lu XiaoFeng was quite taken aback by the news.

"You knew that little devil was lying, and yet you still fell for it, why?" Hua ManLou sighed and laughed miserably.

Lu XiaoFeng sighed and let out a miserable laugh as well. "Because I'm not just an asshole, I'm a dumbass as well."

He looked up just in time to see Xue-Er come chasing up from behind.

"Did you guys see anyone passing by just a bit ago?" She asked, still trying to catch her breath.

"Only a fruit picking granny." Lu XiaoFeng answered.

Xue-Er almost jumped out of her skin when she heard that.

"That granny has to be my sister."

"Your sister? ShangGuan FeiYan?"

Xue-Er nodded, there was light in her eyes. "Only now did I find out that she's not dead, she's always been very good at faking death, after you guys left, I went down to...."

Lu XiaoFeng did not wait for her to finish before turning and leaving. Not just leaving, but grabbing Hua ManLou as well.

"I don't care what you say this time, I'm not going to fall for it! I'm not even listening to you any more." Looks like he really made up his mind this time around, he left in a hurry.

Xue-Er watched them leave, as if mesmerized, only then did she finally let out a gentle sigh.

"Why is it when I tell the truth, nobody ever believes me...." She mumbled to herself.

Lu Xiaofeng Book 2: The Embroidery Bandit

[绣花大盗 Xiuhua Dadao]

By Gu Long

Translated by Moinllieon

Chapter 1 - Scores of Heists

Scolding heat. The sun rays was like heat carrying knives, beating down relentlessly upon the yellow dirt road. Even the knife scar on Chang Man Tian's face was roasted to a shade of red.

To be precise, it was three scars, that and about 7 or 8 internal injuries had earned him his fame and position that he enjoyed on this day. Whenever the weather turns moist or rainy, his internal wounds would starts throbbing again, causing his joints ache, he would be reminded of the hard fought battles of his youth and feel an incredible amount of gratitude!

To have survived this long was not easy, to be able to be the Vice Master Escort earning 500 taels of silver every month was even harder, for that was truly earned with blood and sweat. Lately, he rarely ever escort any job himself. The Head Escort of "Enforcing Peace Escort Service" was a disciple of the same master as he. Between the two of them, the old men spent the last several years enjoying the tranquil and peaceful life, practicing a little martial arts in the morning, drinking some wine in the evening. Just merely the sight of their "Golden Spear Iron Sword Flag" was enough to keep most of the people in the Southeast away from the packages that "Enforcing Peace" had been entrusted with.

But this particular package was just too important, the trustee insisted that the two martial brothers escort the entire delivery process. But since the Head Master was under the weather yet again, Chang Man Tian had little choice but to pick up that pair of huge iron sword of his that weighed more than 13 kilograms each and personally ride out once again.

"Make way... Enforcing Peace... Keep clear..." The Henchman Old Man Zhao was out in front shouting the passage of the escort. He had been at this for 20 years now, even though he was no longer a young lad, he still had a booming voice, especially since he had just drank several jugs worth of Fire Sabres during lunch break that perked him up even more than usual.

Chang Man Tian fished out a green piece of handkerchief and wiped the sweat off of his forehead. Time has no mercy, he suddenly realized that he is really getting old, after this escort mission, it is probably time to hang up the swords and go into retirement. The sun is really scorching down at the moment, if there is a place to catch a shade ahead, then it probably would not hurt to rest a bit before continuing farther.

Chang Man Tian gave the reins a tug and galloped to the front. He was just about to give the instructions to Old Man Zhao when he suddenly noticed that there was a person, busy sewing, sitting smack in the middle of the road. A huge, bearded man.

Having made his way through the pugilistic world for some 30 years now, Chang Man Tian had yet see a man embroidering, much less someone doing so under such a scorching sun while sitting in the middle of the road.

"Could he be insane?" For he really did look like a lunatic, the surface of the road was hot enough to fry an egg on, and yet he was wearing a reddish purple cotton overcoat.

The strange thing was that, while all these men who were wearing a

single layer of shirt was covered in sweat, there was nary a single bead of sweat to be seen on this man's face.

Chang Man Tian frowned, brought his hand up to signal to the rest of the group to stop, and shot a look in Old Man Zhao's direction.

Old Man Zhao had been a veteran of the martial world as well, he had been Chang Man Tian's henchman ever since Chang Man Tian's first escort job.

Naturally, he understood exactly what his long time master wanted. So he lightly coughed a bit to clear his throat and walked up to the man.

That bearded man was concentrating on sewing his flower, just like a newly in love girl sitting in her bedroom sewing up her own wedding dress, totally oblivious to the fact that a dozen or so carriages had been stopped because of him.

The flower he was embroidering on the cloth was peony, a black peony, his embroidery was incredibly more delicate than anything that a girl would make.

"My friend, your embroidery skill are quite remarkable, but pity this isn't a place for sewing." Old Man Zhao suddenly said loudly. His voice was booming to begin with, and now he was purposefully trying to give this man a scare. But unexpectedly not only did this man not look up, he did not even blink one bit.

"Is he not only insane but deaf as well?" Old Man Zhao walked up even

more and patted him on the shoulder.

"Friend, could you let us go by? You see...." He suddenly stopped and his expression suddenly changed. When he had reached over to pat the man on his shoulders, the needle in the bearded man's hand just happened to lift up a bit and pricked him lightly on the back of his hand. What's a little needle prick to a man who barely flinches when slashed by a sabre?

Old Man Zhao did not mind at first, but when he wanted to bring his arm back to his side, he discovered that he could not! That half of his body seemed to have went numb! What kind of evilness was on the tip of that needle?

Old Man Zhao took three steps back and carefully inspected his hand. There was no swelling of any kind, but it just did not respond to his commands anymore. He was surprised and furious at the same time.

Gracefully, Chang Man Tian floated down off his horse and quickly made his way to the bearded man.

"Quite a beautiful peony that you has sewn there my friend." He said, cupping his fist together. The bearded man still did not look up, but suddenly laughed.

"I can sew other things as well."

"Really? What?"

"Blind men."

"Blind men aren't easy to sew." Chang Man Tian snickered.

"On the contrary, blind men are the easiest, two pricks and you get one."

"Oh really? How so?"

"Like this." He suddenly reached out and pricked Old Man Zhao's face twice.

Old Man Zhao let out a blood curdling scream and fell to the ground. Covering his face with his eyes, he was writhing on the ground in pain as blood squirted out from in between his fingers, blood from his eyes! Chang Man Tian's face dropped as he immediately grabbed his sword.

But the big beard was still casually sitting there, seemingly minding his own business.

"See? Two pricks, one blind man."

"That some fast moves my friend." Chang Man Tian let out a little laugh and coldly observed.

"Sewing blind men is what I'm best at, 72 pricks and I can give you 36 blind men." The big beard matter of factly answered.

For this job, Chang Man Tian had taken with him, including himself,

exactly 36 men. Those who were with him were all first rate masters themselves and have all rode forth and joined alongside him.

"What are you doing here? Seeking revenge or robbing the package?" Even though he was shocked, Chang Man Tian was still managed to stay calm.

"I'm here to sew."

"What exactly are you planning to sew?"

"First I'm going to sew myself 36 blind men, then I'm going to sew eight hundred thousand taels worth of caravans to go home with me."

Chang Man Tian let out a long and drawn out laugh.

"Funny, this sword of mine can sew something as well."

"What?"

"Dead men!" His laughter stopped, his sword was unsheathed.

This huge iron sword might not be some incredibly heavy weapon, but it was still the very sword that the legendary "Mister Iron Sword" had used in times past.

On this sword, Chang Man Tian had put in at least forty years of hard

work, how else could he have lived until now?

The accompanying men all that revealed their weapons as well, an Eagle Wing Sabre, a Wise Son Lance, and a Gate of Hell Sword.

When fighting bandits, these men in the escort business did not conform to any pugilistic world rules, and did not worry about fighting one on one.

"Liang Qing Zi, let's go! Go for his eyes!" Chang Man Tian let out a shout.

If you want to turn others into blind men, then others will obviously want to turn you into one as well! This is the law of their world. "A tooth for a tooth, an eye for an eye!" But the big beard was still embroidering as a sword of more than 13 kilograms howled towards him.

The Wise Son Lance pulled a "Poisonous Dragon Drinking" and attacked the man's waist. Enforcing Peace's escort runners had all been trained by the master brothers in one shape or another. Therefore, when they fight, they always complement each other perfectly.

"Finished!" The big beard suddenly laughed.

He had finished his peony and the needle came flicking up sideways. In the sudden cold flash that surrounded him, Chang Man Tian suddenly realized that the flash was in front of his eyes.

Nobody can describe this kind of speed, and almost nobody could

dodge it. Chang Man Tian howled, the sword suddenly flew off of his hand, but his body had collapsed onto the ground.

“Dong!” The iron sword was nailed almost half a meter into the trunk of a huge tree on the side of the road. By now the big beard had just finished sewing his fourth blind man.

Seventy two pricks, thirty six blind men. Such speed, such savageness! A sheet of cloth fell onto Chang Man Tian’s face. On it was embroidered a big red peony.

When Jiang Zhong Wei walked, it always jingled, as if he was a bell himself. Of course, he was not a bell. Jiang Zhong Wei was the Head Warden of the Southern Peace Royal Palace, a very dignified, and very powerful person.

Inside the Royal Palace there was, naturally, a great number of top secret places. And on the door leading to these places, there were, naturally, locks. And they were all under his supervision. Anybody with 30 or so chains of keys on him would jingle when they walk.

He was truly a trustworthy man, not only was he calm and collected, and loyal to the bone, he also trained his body in the “Thirteen Guardians Brute Training”, so even though he was not quite to the point where he was impenetrable to sabres and spears, it was nevertheless very difficult to hurt him. However, it was not difficult for him to hurt others.

His Iron Sand Palm had reached about 90% of its highest level and could readily split boulders or turn smaller rocks into sand. Whenever the Prince entrusted him with another key, there was a sense of relief about him, knowing that the key was safe. At this moment he was just on his way to retrieve a stud of diamonds and a pair of flat jade with a hole in the center, which are traditionally used for ceremonial purposes in China, from the Royal Treasury Vault.

Today was the birthday of the Prince's favorite concubine and the Prince had already promised her those things as birthday gifts.

Like most men in the world, the Prince was always very generous towards the women he loves.

The long hall way had a suppressed peace about it, because this was so close to the Royal Treasury Vault, trespassing, by anyone, for any reason, will result in immediate death!

After entering the restrict area, every 7 or 8 steps or so was a man who Jiang Zhong Wei had hand picked himself, standing guard like stones statues.

These men had all been passed a harsh and rigid training procedure, not a fly landing on their face or a person stumping on their foot would make them move one bit. Not only was Jiang Zhong Wei hold enormous and popular influence over them, his orders were also clear and absolute. If anybody slacked off in his duty and let so much as a dog into the restricted area, what awaits them was also death! Even he has to say the password of the day before entering the area.

Today's password was: "Sun and Moon both shine brightly." Because today was a very good day according to the almanacs.

Even on that stern and serious face of Jiang Zhong Wei, a hint of happiness could be discerned. For he was an invited guest at the Prince's consort's birthday bash as well. After finishing this task, he would immediately change outfits and join the celebration. Therefore his steps were a little faster than normal as well.

Eight personal guards dressed in silk and armed with a sabre at their side followed him. Silk robed guards were the best among the guards within the guard units, and on top of that, these eight men were hand picked from among over 100 of the silk robed guards. Jiang Zhong Wei had always been a prudent man.

The heavy doors leading to the Royal Treasury Vault were heavily locked, there were 3 separate layers of doors, each more than half a meter thick, and the locks on them were all custom made by the best locksmiths.

Jiang Zhong Wei finally opened the last door as a gust of cold and moist air hit him in the face.

This place was just most treasure vaults in this world, cold, moist, dark, and sinister. Just like a tomb.

The only difference was that tombs had at least dead people in them, this place did not even have a dead ant in it.

Everytime Jiang Zhong Wei entered here, he was always struck with a strange thought: if a man could have all of the treasures inside of this vault, but only under the condition that he lived in here, what good would it be? Even if you give him all of the riches in the world, he would not want to stay in this place for just one day.

This thought struck him again this time as well, when he pushed the door open and walked in, his only wish was to walk out as soon as possible. He could never have imagined that once he entered this time, he would never come out again!

Unbelievably, inside of this cold, moist, dark, and sinister vault, there was a person. A live person.

This person's face was covered with his beard, wore a reddish purple cotton overcoat, and was, amazingly, sitting on one of the treasure chests sewing.

Jiang Zhong Wei could not even have imagined something like this in his dreams, he could barely believe his very own eyes.

But in front of him was really a person, sitting there sewing, a real, live, man.

"Could he be a ghost?" Other than ghosts, what else could get in here?

Jiang Zhong Wei suddenly felt his spine shiver and shuddered despite of himself. The bearded man was concentrating on embroidering, just like girls do as they sit in their bedrooms thinking about their crush. He was

sewing peony, black peony on a red piece of satin.

"How did you get in here?" Jiang Zhong Wei collected himself and demanded.

"I walked in here." The big beard did not even look up as he answered matter of factly.

"Do you know what kind of place this is?"

"It's a place for sewing!"

"So you came here just to embroider?" Jiang Zhong Wei let out a cold laugh.

"Because I can only sew what I want to sew here!" The big beard nodded.

"And what's that?"

"A blinded Jiang Zhong Wei!"

Jiang Zhong Wei reared back and let out a maddening laugh. Only when he is furious and ready to kill does he laugh madly like this. With the laughter still echoing, his body lunged forward. His palms whistled through the air like tigers as he pulled out his boulder-smashing Iron Sand Palm. He suddenly felt the center of his palm temporarily go numb, as if he had just been stunned by a bee, but all the power behind his

palm had suddenly and mysteriously disappeared. At this moment, a flash of cold light arrived in front of his eyes.

“Thirteen Guardians Brute Training” might be the most powerful skill in the world in hardening one’s body, but it does not cover one’s eyes.

The guards outside suddenly heard a blood curdling yell and tried to scramble in, but the iron door had already been closed from the inside. By the time they pried open the door, an unconscious Jiang Zhong Wei laid on the ground, a blood red piece of satin covered his face. On the satin was embroidered a black peony!

The incense had already been lit in meditation room. Hua Man Lou had already finished bathing and was quietly sitting there, waiting.

If you want to get a taste of some of Father Bitter Gourd’s cooking, not only do you have to wash yourself, but you have to be patient. Father Bitter Gourd was not a person who cooks often, not only did the guest have to be the right kind, but he also had to be in a good mood. The guests today were exceptionally right, other than Hua Man Lou, there was Ancient Pine Hermit and that man who claimed to be the number 1 in chess, number 2 in poetry and wine, and number 3 in sword skill: Wooden Taoist.

Obviously, these people were not just any regular guests, therefore Father Bitter Gourd was especially happy today. In the vast and boundless sunset, the crisp and clear sounds of the late bell could be heard, finally signaling the coming of the night. By the time Hua Man Lou walked

outside, Ancient Pine Hermit and Wooden Taoist were already waiting for him in the yard. The night breeze blew through the bamboo forest, the scorching day was already on the other side of the sunset.

"To have two of my seniors waiting for me, I don't know how I can forgive myself." Hua Man Lou smiled and greeted them.

The Wooden Taoist laughed. This never conforming, always different elder of the Wu Dang Sect had actually also changed his usual, patched thousand times over, Taoist robe for a clean and sparkling blue shirt.

Precisely because he did not want to be held to other people's standards and expectations, he willingly gave up the position of the Head Master of Wu Dang. But in order to taste some of Father Bitter Gourd's personal cooking, he was willing to suffer a little.

Everybody knew about Father Bitter Gourd's strange temperament.

"Looks like this old Taoist is right after all." Ancient Pine Hermit inexplicably let out a sigh.

"What did Father say?" Hua Man Lou inquired.

"I said that you would surely know that we were here, even if we hold absolutely still, you would still know!" The Wooden Taoist laughed.

"But I can't figure out exactly how did you know that we were here." Ancient Pine Hermit sighed again.

"Me neither." The Wooden Taoist conceded. "But I have a good point about me that you can't match."

"And what's that?"

"When I run into something that I can't figure out, I stop thinking about them!" The Wooden Taoist joked.

"That's why I have always maintained that if you give up drinking, you would surely live until you are 300 years old!" Ancient Pine Hermit joking observed.

"Why would I possibly want to live to 300 if I can't drink?"

The bamboo curtains of the meditation room had been drawn. But from there permeated the indescribably delicious smell of food, delicious enough to lead any human to the table in hopes of food.

"Father Bitter Gourd's vegetable cooking is truly peerless in this world." Ancient Pine Hermit sighed.

"He had always maintained that his cooking was enough to even tempt the Bodhisattva!" Wooden Taoist laughingly claimed.

"Well, the food had already been placed on the table, what are we waiting for?" Ancient Pine Hermit commented.

Drawing aside the bamboo curtain sheet, they walked in, and were all shocked. Not only had the food been already placed on the table, there was already a man there, eating to his heart's desire.

This uninvited guest did not wait for them, nor he did not bath either. In reality, not only was his body covered in mud and dirt, his body emanated a stinking odor of sweat. But not only had Father Bitter Gourd not chased him away, incredibly, he was sitting at his side, constantly putting food into his bowl, as if he was afraid that this guest might not eat enough.

"This monk is playing favorites." Wooden Taoist sighed.

"We are the ones he invited, yet he lets someone else eat first." Ancient Pine Hermit grimly agreed.

"And then he demanded that we wash up, but then this guy looked as if he had just came rolling out from a mud puddle." Wooden Taoist continued.

Father Bitter Gourd laughed at their comments: "True, this monk is playing favorites, but only to this one person, so there's no point for you guys to get mad."

"Why do you favor him anyways?" The Wooden Taoist demanded.

"Because I have no idea what to do whenever I run into him."

"I don't blame you," the Wooden Taoist laughed as well. "Last time, this

guy stole two jugs of Virgin's Blush that I had sat for more than 50 years. And all I could do was stare angrily at him!"

"Even the Bodhisattva run out of ideas when this guy shows up." Hua Man Lou ruefully smiled.

Who else could this man be but Lu Xiao Feng.

A plate of ham and another plate of tofu had already been cleaned off when Lu Xiao Feng finally stopped and shot a smile towards the three guests.

"Go right ahead and curse me if you want, I'll just keep on eating. You guys have a good time cursing, I just happen to be having a great time eating."

"Others might fall for your tricks, but not I." Wooden Taoist burst out laughing and sat down. Instantly three pieces of ducks had disappeared into his belly as well.

Hua Man Lou sat down along side Lu Xiao Feng, and immediately frowned.

"You usually don't smell bad at all, how come you smell like a dog that just crawled out of an outhouse today?"

"Because I haven't taken a bath in 10 days."

"How many days?" Hua Man Lou was shocked at the answer.

"Ten days."

"Why haven't you taken a bath in 10 days?" Hua Man Lou frowned disapprovingly.

"I have been busy."

"Busy doing what?"

"Busy holding up my end of a gamble."

"Who did you lose a bet with?"

"Other than that devil Si Kong Zhai Xing, who else could it be?" Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"How did you lose to him?"

"Remember how I humiliated him last time we competed doing back flips?" Lu Xiao Feng laughed. "Well, this time he came up to me and wanted a rematch. How could I turn that down?"

"Of course you accepted!"

"But it turns out that this little bastard had been doing nothing but

practicing back flips these days. In two hours he did six hundred and eighty back flips! What am I suppose to do after that?"

"So what did you lose to him?"

"We agreed that if I won, he would have to, from now on, get on his knees, kowtow to me, and yell at the top of his lungs: 'Uncle!' if he ever sees me again. And that if I lose, then I would dig out one earthworm for every back flip he did in the next 10 days."

Hua Man Lou laughed.

"No wonder you look like an earthworm yourself now."

"Did you really dig out 680 worms for him?" The Wooden Taoist could not control himself anymore either and asked in between fits of laughter.

"The first several days wasn't that bad, found a lot of worms." Lu Xiao Feng sighed and put up a brave smile. "But later on, finding a worm got harder than a slacker finding his wife."

"What does the King of Thieves need all those worms for?" The Ancient Pine Hermit had to ask.

"He doesn't!" Lu Xiao Feng bitterly replied. "He just wanted to see me dig worms."

"Who could have imagined that Lu Xiao Feng would have today!"

Wooden Taoist was having a good laugh over this. "Makes you feel good all over!"

"Do you want a bet with me as well?" Lu Xiao Feng proposed, after his eyes twirled about for a bit inside of their sockets.

"A bet over what?"

"Drinking."

"I'm not going to fall for that." The Wooden Taoist told him with a smile.

"You are admitting defeat already?" Lu Xiao Feng shot him a sideways look.

"I admitted defeat a long time ago. When it comes to drinking I'm no match for you, when it comes to sword skills I'm no match for Xi Men Chui Xue and Yie Gu Xing. If you really want to get in a bet with me, then do it over chess!"

"You think I'm going to fall for that?" Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"Other people know that I'm Number 1 in the world in chess, but they don't know that there is something else that nobody can match me in!" the Wooden Taoist proudly declared.

"What's that?"

"Eating, would you be willing to have an eating contest with me?"

"I want to, but I'm not a rice barrel!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

{Note: the term "rice barrel", or "fan tong", is a general put down in Chinese.}

"Who would have thought that the world famous Lu Xiao Feng would admit defeat. This is truly a rare occasion." The Wooden Taoist sighed as well.

"In truth, recently he is no longer the most sensational guy in the martial world!" Father Bitter Gourd suddenly proclaimed.

"Who else could it be?" Lu Xiao Feng asked.

"Who do you think?"

"Xi Men Chui Xue?"

"Rumors say that he has been keeping that young Lady Sun of the Four Beauties of E'Mei recently and have not shown his face in the martial world for quite a while now!" Hua Man Lou answered for Father Bitter Gourd. Lu Xiao Feng smiled at that.

"Who would have thought that he would have a day like today as well? I thought for sure he was going to turn into a monk eventually."

"We don't want monks like that in Buddhism!" Father Bitter Gourd replied.

"Well if it's not Xi Men Chui Xue, could it be Yie Gu Xing?" Lu Xiao Feng took another crack at it.

"Not him either!"

"Yie Gu Xing has been very sick recently!" The Wooden Taoist revealed.

"He could get sick too?" Lu Xiao Feng was quite taken aback by the news. "What did he come down with?"

"The same illness as me. Laziness." Wooden Taoist smiled. "Once you catch it, no matter who you are, you'll never cause a sensation again!"

"Could it possibly be the Boss and the Boss's Wife?" Lu Xiao Feng asked after thinking it over for a bit.

"The Boss is even lazier!" Hua Man Lou laughed and eliminated that choice.

"The Honest Monk isn't big on causing a stiff, Abbot... no, can't be him...." Lu Xiao Feng thought out loud.

"Could it be that female tiger over there at Mount Qi Xia?" He asked, after much deep thought.

"No, all no. Not only do you not know this guy, I guarantee you haven't even heard of him before!" Father Bitter Gourd replied.

"What kind of a person is he?"

"A man that knows how to embroider!" Father Bitter Gourd answered. Lu Xiao Feng was taken aback momentarily before he laughed.

"Actually there are quite a few men who knows how to embroider. Of the several tailors that I know of, a couple of them knows how to embroider!"

"But not only does he know how to sew flowers, he can sew blind men!" Father Bitter Gourd responded. Lu Xiao Feng was taken aback yet again.

"Sew blind men?"

"Seems like he had sewed at least 70 or 80 blind men in the last several days!"

"How does he sew blind men?"

"With a sewing needle, two pricks and you get one!"

Lu Xiao Feng finally understood what he was saying.

"What kind of people are these blind men that he has sewn?"

"There's at least 4 or 5 men that you know of in that group!"

"Who?"

"Chang Man Tian, Hua Yi Fan, Jiang Zhong Wei...."

"The Jiang Zhong Wei of the Southeast Royal Palace?" He did not even finish before Lu Xiao Feng's expression changed drastically.

"Is there another Jiang Zhong Wei?"

"But ever since he entered the Royal Palace, he hasn't meddled in the affairs of the martial world, why would anybody go after him?" Lu Xiao Feng frowned.

"Nobody went after him, but somebody did go after those 18 bushels of diamond studs in the Royal Palace!" Father Bitter Gourd answered.

"This person didn't just blind Jiang Zhong Wei but made off with 18 bushels of diamond studs from the Royal Palace?"

"On top of that, he also took with him 70 or so priceless pieces of art work and calligraphy that Hua Yu Gan has collected, 800 thousand taels of silver entrusted to escort to Enforcing Peace Escort Service, a coveted shipmen that Enforcing East insured, and some 90,000 taels of golden leaflets from Golden Sand River!" Father Bitter Gourd sighed to catch his breath and continued. "Within a space of about a month, this man has

committed 60 some huge heists, and all by himself. Causing quite a stir wouldn't you say?"

"How come I didn't hear anything about any of this?" Lu Xiao Feng asked, still a bit startled by the news.

"You have been busy in the Northwest lately, these crimes happened in the Southeast. The news only got here in the last couple of days, only you were busy digging for worms!" Father Bitter Gourd.

"This news had just got to here, and yet you know all about it!" Lu Xiao Feng observed.

"Mmm!"

"Since when did you become so well connected to all that's happening in the world?" Lu Xiao Feng wondered.

"Don't forget, I have always had a most well connected younger martial brother." Father Bitter Gourd sighed.

"Jin Jiu Ling?"

"Luckily, I only have one martial brother like him!" Father Bitter Gourd let out an exasperated smile.

"Now I understand." Lu Xiao Feng let out a long, drawn out sigh.

“What do you understand?”

“Jin Jiu Ling was good friends with Jiang Zhong Wei, and not to mention he was once the Number One Bounty Hunter in the world. Even though he had washed his hands of the business, but he has to get in on this matter.”

Father Bitter Gourd conceded Lu Xiao Feng’s point. Once someone has worked one day for the government, it was hard to get out.

“To this day, I still don’t understand why he decided to go into that line of work back then!” Father Bitter Gourd sighed.

“What? You want him to be a monk instead?” Wooden Taoist interrupted.

“A monk would at least not have as much trouble and worry!” Father Bitter Gourd replied.

“But monks don’t have wives either!” Wooden Taoist jabbed. Father Bitter Gourd did not reply anymore. Everybody in the martial world knew that the biggest flaw that Jin Jiu Ling has was that he fancied himself to be suave and charming. It had even been rumored that the reason he entered public service was because of a woman.

“Jin Jiu Ling has been publically acknowledged as the best in the 300 year history of the Six Doors. Any and all cases, be it large or small, would be solved the moment he gets his hands on it.” Lu Xiao Feng stated.

"That's why I have always thought that his biggest problem is that he was too capable, too smart." Father Bitter Gourd sighed some more.

"But even the smartest man would eventually come across something that he can't solve." Lu Xiao Feng hypothesized, and Father Bitter Gourd agreed.

"Maybe this case is that very one that he could not solve, so he wants a helper." Again, Father Bitter Gourd agreed to that notion.

"And since you only have one martial brother like him, you would naturally help him find a helper!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed and ruefully laughed. "The unlucky thing is, I just happen to be the perfect helper, whenever someone run into something they can't solve, they come to me, therefore...."

"Therefore....?" Father Bitter Gourd asked.

"Therefore when you invited me here to eat this meal, you probably did not do it out of the kindness of your heart."

"Don't forget that it was you who barged in here, I didn't actually invite you."

"Maybe I just happen to be unlucky to begin with." Lu Xiao Feng laughed at his own misery. "Why else would I just barge in here like that?"

"You seem to be getting quite unlucky recently!" The Wooden Taoist laughed.

"But this time I'm not having it, I don't care if he sews flowers or patches up pants, none of my business. I don't care how big this thing get, I want no part of it!"

"He didn't want you get in on this anyways, what are you making a big fuss about anyways?" Father Bitter Gourd plainly told him.

"He didn't?" Lu Xiao Feng was startled.

"I truly did not!" A man replied, smiling.

Of course, he was none other than Jin Jiu Ling.

As quite a number of people in the martial world know, there was two things about Jin Jiu Ling that very few people could match. His cloths, and his eyes. Jin Jiu Ling's eyes were not especially big, nor were they exceptionally bright, but as long as he laid an eye on something, he would never forget it.

The cloths that Jin Jiu Ling wore were always made of the finest of fabrics, in the latest of styles, and done with the most delicate of care. Even that fold out fan that he carried in his hand was a priceless object, when push comes to shove, it could even be used as a weapon. Jin Jiu Ling's skill at finding and hitting pressure points were first rate. In reality, everything about him was first rate.

If the wine was not first class, he would never drink it, if the woman was not first rate, he would not even look at her, if the carriage was not first

class, he would never get in it. But he was not a first rate rich man, luckily for him, he had many money earning abilities. He was an expert in appraising old paintings and calligraphy as well as having an uncanny ability to judge thoroughbreds. Those two abilities alone were enough to assure him a first rate life for the rest of his days.

Besides, he was still a very handsome and attractive man, and did not look to be that old. This made it possible for him to spend very little money on what should be his biggest drain of cash. The beauties' smiles that other people might have to spend one thousand taels of gold to get usually came to him without him having to spent a penny.

That was why he had always lived quite comfortably, and also had preserved himself very well, looking not a bit like the martial arts master that had criminals shivering at the mere mention of his name but instead like a poetry writing, horse riding playboy.

"Have you found anything worthwhile lately?" Ancient Pine Hermit immediately asked upon seeing him walk in.

The Ancient Pine Hermit's biggest hobby was collecting classic art work and calligraphy. His collection was definitely not any worse than that of Hua Yu Gan's.

"All the good stuff that already been taken to MountHuang by my dear hermit, what's left for me to find?" Jin Jiu Ling smiled.

"Not even one painting?"

Jin Jiu Ling paused for a moment before smiling again.

"I have on me a recently created flower piece!"

"Well? Come on, let's see it!" Ancient Pine Hermit asked. But Jin Jiu Ling was already in the middle of bringing it out. It was a blood red piece of satin, on it was sewn a black peony.

"What is this?" Ancient Pine Hermit asked after being momentarily surprised by it.

"Recently, there has been quite a demand for embroidery." Jin Jiu Ling smiled.

"Could this be the personal work of Divine Needle, Madame Xue?" Ancient Pine Hermit asked.

"No, a man sewed this."

"That particular sewing man?" Ancient Pine Hermit's expression noticeably changed at the revelation.

Jin Jiu Ling nodded.

"This was the very one that he sewed inside the Royal Treasury Vault."

"Was he really sitting there sewing?" Lu Xiao Feng asked.

Jin Jiu Ling nodded again.

"When Jiang Zhong Wei opened the door, he was sitting there sewing this very flower!"

"The Royal Treasury Vault must be guarded inside out by a forest of men, how did he get in?" Lu Xiao Feng frowned.

"Nobody knows how he got in, nobody even knows where to start." Jin Jiu Ling smiled rather tiredly.

"And he did not leave any clues whatsoever?"

"None."

"What kind of a person was he?"

"He was the kind of person that had a huge beard and still wore a huge cotton overcoat even on a scorching hot day."

"And?"

"And he's a man, and he knows how to embroider, and he's very good at that!"

"That's all you know?"

"That's all I know, and that's the same thing that everybody knows, nobody knows any more than I."

"What type of kungfu did he use?"

"Don't know!"

"Even Jiang Zhong Wei couldn't tell?"

"Even a veteran of the pugilistic world like Chang Man Tian couldn't tell, what hope does Jiang Zhong Wei have?" Jin Jiu Ling sighed.

"Jiang Zhong Wei's Iron Palms is probably the best in the Southeast."

"But he still did not even have a chance to make a move!" Jin Jiu Ling sighed again.

"How could someone this powerful just suddenly pop out of thin air....?" Lu Xiao Feng frowned.

"You said that you weren't going to get into this matter, why are you asking all these questions?" Master Bitter Gourd coldly inquired.

"What's the harm in asking?"

"Of course there isn't any harm." Jin Jiu Ling put up another tired smile.

"It's just that everything I know, you know now as well."

Lu Xiao Feng stared at him for a while.

"Why did you tell me everything?" He suddenly asked.

"Because you asked."

"No other reason?"

"No."

"And you were not purposefully waiting here for me?"

"How could I have known that you would come here?" Jin Jiu Ling could not help but put up another tired smile.

"And you did not have any intentions of finding me?"

"No."

"Good, now I can relax and drink wine." Lu Xiao Feng smiled and proclaimed. Even though his mouth was saying "good", his smile was very awkward, very unnatural, and it seemed like he did not want to drink anymore wine.

But now it was Jin Jiu Ling's turn to suddenly smile.

"But now that you are here, I do have something to ask you!" He declared. Lu Xiao Feng's eyes immediately lit up.

"I knew it, I knew you must have something to ask of me!" He laughed and said.

"To crack this case and find this Embroidery Bandit, there's probably only one person in the entire world that is capable of that." Jin Jiu Ling said. Lu Xiao Feng's eyes shone even brighter, who else but him could solve this mystery?

"Who is this person that you speak of?" But he purposefully asked nevertheless, wanting to hear Jin Jiu Ling say it.

"Si Kong Zhai Xing!"

"Who did you say?" Lu Xiao Feng asked after being rendered momentarily speechless.

"Si Kong Zhai Xing." Jin Jiu Ling repeated. Lu Xiao Feng looked away, seemingly ignoring him totally.

But Jin Jiu Ling somehow, did not seem to notice and continued.

"Si Kong Zhai Xing is known as the King of Thieves, and he is truly a genius that comes along once every century. If there was anybody in the world that could figure out how the Embroidery Bandit got into the Royal

Treasury Vault, then that person is Si Kong Zhai Xing."

Lu Xiao Feng had already began to drink, seemingly too disinterested to even listen anymore.

But Jin Jiu Ling just kept on going.

"If we want to crack this case, then we must find Si Kong Zhai Xing. But unfortunately, he's the type of person who's whereabouts and movements are always a mystery, so...."

"So you want to ask me where you can find him?" Lu Xiao Feng could not contain himself anymore.

"Correct."

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly, and quite forcibly, put the cup in his hand down onto the table.

"So all that time that you wasted telling me all that garbage, was just for finding him?"

"Who else could I go to besides him?" Jin Jiu Ling sighed.

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly jumped up and pointed at his own nose.

"Me!" He was practically shouting. "Why can't you ask me?"

Jin Jiu Ling laughed, laughed and shook his head.

"You won't do!"

"What do you mean I won't do?" Lu Xiao Feng seemed to jump even higher.

"There's absolutely no way that you could do this." Jin Jiu Ling was actually still shaking his head.

"Why can't I?"

"Because this case is truly too dangerous," Jin Jiu Ling matter of factly answered. "Besides, you already said that you wanted no part of this!"

"Who said that I wanted no part of this? I'm going to get into this just to show you that I can." By now, Lu Xiao Feng was way beyond screaming.

"I'm still willing to bet that you won't solve this case!"

"Alright!" Lu Xiao Feng slammed his hand onto the table. "Whatever you want to bet, I'm in!"

He had not even finished his sentence before he noticed that other people were laughing. In fact, everyone was laughing. It was the kind of laugh that you get when you suddenly see someone step onto a pile of dog droppings. Lu Xiao Feng suddenly realized that he had just step onto

a pile of dog droppings, a huge, stinking pile that he could not pull out of no matter how much he wanted to.

"Inviting him is not as good as baiting him, so true that saying is." The Wooden Taoist sighed after having a good laugh.

The dinner was over. Ancient Pine Hermit was someone who took very good care of himself, he gets up early, and goes to sleep early as well. The Wooden Taoist had that illness, laziness; and Father Bitter Gourd had a night session to attend to. There were only 3 people left in the guest room.

Lu Xiao Feng stared at the black peony on the red satin.

"When was the first time this man appeared?" He suddenly asked.

"The third of June, the first person to run into him was Chang Man Tian." Jin Jiu Ling replied.

"And the last time?"

"The last that I know of was 13 days ago, whether or not there was any new heists these last several days, I know not!"

"Thirteen days ago I was busy doing back flips with Si Kong Zhai Xing, obviously it wasn't him."

"I didn't suspected him to begin with!"

"And you didn't want to ask him to help either" Lu Xiao Feng coldly rebuked.

Jin Jiu Ling laughed.

"All I know is that you had just finished digging out over 600 worms for him, so you weren't exactly feeling gracious towards him!"

"So you purposefully baited me?"

"How else could I get you involved in this?" Jin Jiu Ling laughed and replied.

"Looks like I really shouldn't try and make friends with people in your line of work!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Well no matter what, since we are all now knee deep in this, it's best to figure out a way to get out of this."

"First, we have to figure out what kind of person this is." Lu Xiao Feng said after some deep thought.

"Agreed."

"From what I can tell, not only does this person do things fast and clean, his martial arts are also first rate, there's no way he's some new guy who just came onto the world."

"That's what I think as well, he must be a very famous person in disguise. But I can't figure out who it could be."

"He purposefully put on a big beard and a big cotton overcoat, and sat in the middle of the road sewing; all in order to distract people's attention so that nobody would notice some other things about him!"

"Looks like you should be in my line of work." Jin Jiu Ling joked. "Even an old fox like me, who has spent ten years or so in Six Door could not analyze the situation any better than you."

Lu Xiao Feng purposefully put up a stiff face.

"You already dragged me into this, you can't stop kissing my *** now!"

"One kiss, two kiss, nothing beats *** kissing! It's never wrong to kiss *** a couple more times than necessary!" Jin Jiu Ling loudly laughed.

"No matter how good a disguise is, there will always be some flaw somewhere," Hua Man Lou suddenly spoke up. "Maybe Chang Man Tian and them didn't notice, maybe they noticed, but didn't think it was important."

"Very possible!" Jin Jiu Ling agreed.

"Therefore, if we ask them again, in detail; maybe we can find some new clues!" Hua Man Lou concluded.

"We?" Lu Xiao Feng frowned.

"We!"

"Does 'we' include you?" Lu Xiao Feng wondered.

"Don't forget, I'm blind." Hua Man Lou smiled. "How can I not get involved in other blind men's matters?"

Lu Xiao Feng and Jin Jiu Ling shot a look at one another, both of them feeling a bit guilty. They had been going back and forth with "blind-this" and "blind-that" just a bit earlier, totally forgetting that there was a blind man sitting right beside them. It seemed as if nobody has ever really treated Hua Man Lou like a blind man!

Lu Xiao Feng lightly coughed a couple of times.

"Ok, let's split up so we can do this faster. The two of you go find Chang Man Tian and Jiang Zhong Wei!"

"And you?" Jin Jiu Ling wondered.

"I'm going to take this and find someone!" Lu Xiao Feng put the piece of red satin into his shirt.

"Find who?"

"A female tiger!"

"Which one?"

"The prettiest one. Of course." Lu Xiao Feng smiled. Jin Jiu Ling smiled as well.

"Don't forget, the prettiest one is also the meaniest one. Careful not to get bit!"

"Oh he'll be careful, you can be sure of that!" Hua Man Lou matter of factly reassured him.

"How come?"

"Because he's already been bitten quite a few times!" Hua Man Lou smiled.

There were four female tigers in the martial world. Seemed like all four had taken a couple of bites out of Lu Xiao Feng one time or another.

Chapter 2 - Visiting Divine Needle Xue

Hillside. Under the light of the dusk, the green hillside seemed to change into a strange and surreal deep purple. The time now was dusk, and the mountainside was covered with all different types of roses in full bloom. Two young girls with their hairs done in pig tails were picking flowers. From their mouths emanated the soft, sweet tunes of mountain hymns.

Their song was softer and gentler than the warm summer breeze, they themselves were prettier than the flowers. When Lu Xiao Feng walked onto the side of the hillside, their song suddenly stopped as both of them stared at Lu Xiao Feng with their big, bright eyes. Luckily, Lu Xiao Feng was used to having women stare at him, so he did not blush but instead smiled.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" This young lady had big eyes and some small hints of freckles on her nose, all of which made her look even more cute and adorable.

"The flowers are so pretty here, can't I just be looking at the flowers?" Lu Xiao Feng replied, still smiling.

"No!" The freckled girl's eyes got even bigger. "This place is ours, we don't welcome men!"

"Little girls shouldn't have such short tempers," Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "Girls like that might not find a husband!"

"That's why I'm never mean!" The other girl had a round face, and when she smiles two dimples appear, making her look sweet and tender, just like she says.

"If you like flowers so much, how about I give you two?" She was still sweetly smiling.

"Great!"

The girl with the dimples walked up and, still smiling sweetly, reached into her flower basket. What she took out from the flower basket was not flowers, but scissors as she suddenly attacked Lu Xiao Feng. This sweet and tender little girl's moves were unbelievably quick, fierce, and vicious.

Even Lu Xiao Feng was caught by the surprise. Lucky for him, this was not the first time that a woman tried to stab him with a pair of scissors and he even seemed to be expecting it. With a quick spin of his body, he quickly back off 5 or so meters.

"This man doesn't look like anything better than scum, don't let him get away!" The freckled girl shouted. A pair of scissors appeared in her hand as well as she charged into the fray. Her moves were not slow either.

"Scissors are for cutting flowers, since when did they start being used to cut people?" Lu Xiao Feng miserably joked. He had dodged the first couple of moves, but the girls' attacks became more and more vicious. He fought hard to fight off the urge to yank the scissors out of their hands, to have a huge hole poked onto your body was not exactly a fun idea.

At this moment, another person suddenly appeared on the hillside.

"If you want to cut him, only cut off those 2 little mustache of his, but make sure you don't actually cut him to death!" Smiling, she instructed. Her cloths were snow white in color, the material looked light and soft. She stood elegantly and lightly on the top of the hill, as if at any moment she could be carried away by the wind. She was staring at Lu Xiao Feng with eyes that were overflowing with an indescribable warm and tenderness.

The two girls suddenly stopped and somersaulted back to in front of her.

"Miss know this person?"

"Mmhmm!"

"Who is this person?"

"Can't you tell that he has four eye brows?"

"Lu Xiao Feng? This person is Lu Xiao Feng?" Both of the girls started to giggle uncontrollably at the realization. "No wonder he looked like a criminal when he smiled!"

"The Miss is a female tiger, but who would have thought that her servants are also that vicious." Lu Xiao Feng sighed and meekly smiled. "If

I was a bit slower, there's probably already 17 or 18 holes on my body."

"Well, who's fault is it that you took so long to come to see me?" The Miss bit her lip. "I'm really tempted to actually poke 18 holes in you. But..."

She did not finish her sentence, but her face was already red, red like the setting sun on of the faraway mountains. Incredibly, she was very shy.

Lu Xiao Feng stared at her, seemingly mesmerized.

The Miss blushed even more.

"Why are you staring at me, it's not like a flower on my face." She lightly said.

"Such a shy and proper little lady, who would have guessed that she's 'The Cold Ruskha', Xue Bing, the mere sight of whom would give everyone in the martial world a headache?" Lu Xiao Feng sighed again and mumbled to himself. "It's a strange world isn't it?"

"Do you get a headache when you see me?" Xue Bing asked.

"No, no head ache." Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "But my heart is beating three times faster than it normally does!"

"This guy might have a pair of criminal eyes, but that mouth of his is sweeter than honey!" The dimpled girl laughed and whispered.

"If his mouth wasn't sweet, how could he get Miss to think about him every second of everyday?" The other girl whispered back.

"Don't you girls know when to be quiet? Who said that I think about this heartless low life at all?" Xue Bing shot an angry look at the two girls and said, blushing. She was pouting but smiling, mad but embarrassed, but the bright and vibrant sunset had seemed to have lost all of its color.

"I really should have came earlier, why did I wait until today?" Lu Xiao Feng mumbled to himself again, and sighed.

"I know why." Xue Bing elegantly replied.

"You do?"

"You see me and forget the others, but when you see others, you forget all about me." Xue Bing bit her lip again. "You are a heartless man without a bit of care through and through!"

"If I knew I was going to get reprimanded, I probably shouldn't have came!" Lu Xiao Feng meekly smiled.

"You think I can't see through your little ideas? If you don't have some pressing need, would you have came?" Xue Bing coldly said.

"I really do have a pressing need," Lu Xiao Feng confessed. "But not to for you!"

"Well? Tell me! Who are you here to see?" Xue Bing put up a serious face.

"For Madame!"

"What are you trying to pull now?" Xue Bing found this all very strange.
"Why do you want to see Madame?"

"I have something to ask of her!"

"I'm not going to allow you to trouble Madame. If you have a question, just ask me, it's the same."

"But there's absolutely know way you could help with this!"

"And what is that?"

"Embroidery."

"Embroidery? You want to learn to sew? When did you become a tailor?" This was getting stranger by the minute to Xue Bing.

"Only tailors are allowed to learn to sew?"

"Even if you kill me, I still won't believe that you actually want to learn to sew!"

Once again, Lu Xiao Feng had to fess up.

"But I really have something to ask Madame, could you take me to her?"

"I'm still 'Divine Needle' Madame Xue's descendent, remember? Why don't you ask me?"

"Because I know you never wanted to touch sewing needles at all." Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "You told me yourself, as soon as you pick one up, you fall asleep!"

"You actually still remember that?"

"I remember every word you have ever said to me. So it's best if you take me to Madame as soon as possible!"

"Well, I'm not going to. What are you going to do about that?" Xue Bing mysteriously smiled.

Madame Xue was already 77 years old this year, but nobody could ever tell that she was 77 years old. In certain not well lit situations, quite a number of people would actually mistake her for someone who was not a day over 38. Her manners and bearing are forever appropriate and perfect, her eyes were still as bright and moving as they were in days of old. This was especially true whenever she sees a young person that she liked, then a glimmer of maiden innocence could even be spotted in her eyes.

Lu Xiao Feng just happens to be a young man that she liked. Lu Xiao

Feng liked her very much as well. He had always wished that every woman could be as beautiful as her at her age - He always wished that the world would be more beautiful that it already was.

"You should come and see me more often you know." Madame Xue smiled. "A woman as old as I am are no longer a danger to the likes of you now. At least you shouldn't be afraid of me trying to force you to marry me!"

"I would come more often, but Xue Bing wouldn't let me!" Lu Xiao Feng purposefully exaggerated a sigh.

"Oh?"

"Just today, she wouldn't lead me here to you!"

"Why?"

"I don't know why either." Lu Xiao Feng blinked innocently. "If you ask me I think she must be jealous."

Madame Xue laughed some more. Her eyes began to glow and the wrinkles on her face disappeared.

"And could you please take a look at this?" Lu Xiao Feng took this opportunity to present the piece of red satin cloth to her.

"What about it?" Madame Xue only needed to glance the satin out of

the corner of her eyes for the look of disapproval appeared on her face. Shaking her head, she asked further. "I sewed better when I was just 6 years old!"

"I'm not asking you to inspect the flower," Lu Xiao Feng smiled. "I'm requesting you to take a look at the satin and the thread."

"I have seen millions of these things in my life, and you want me to look at some more?"

"That's why I'm asking you to take a look at this, precisely because you have seen so many of these. Could you determine where the satin and the thread are from, and which shop sells it?"

Madame Xue took the piece of satin into her hand and lightly touched it with her finger nail.

"The satin is from Lucky Omen from the capital, the thread is bought from Lucky Symbol. Both of these shops are owned by the same boss, located at Sticky Partition Wall." She immediately concluded.

"And only at their headquarters in the capital can you buy these goods right?"

"Both of these shop only has one location, there aren't any other branches!"

"Do they ship or sell to other shops?"

"Even if other shops have these goods, they got it from personally going to these stores and buying them!" Madame Xue explained further. "These two stores make top quality stuff that they sell themselves. They don't make alot, nor do they advertise much. Their boss, Yan Ah Fu is a very modest person that's not trying to get rich in the business!"

"Where is his shop at in the capital?"

"In a very remote alleyway off the street behind the ColdPalace. All these years he has never advertised a bit. Other than real experts, very few people know about it!" Madame Xue suddenly smiled. "Be honest, did you fall for this girl here but couldn't find her because she's hiding from you? Is that why you want to find her using this?"

{Note: The ColdPalace is the traditionally the palace where the wives and concubines of past Emperors reside until their deaths.}

Lu Xiao Feng was already in shock, only after a long time did he snap out of it.

"Woman? Did a woman sew this?" He finally uttered.

"Of course a woman sewed this."

"Are... are you sure?"

"Would you make a mistake when looking at women? Would you

mistake an old hag for a young girl?" Madame Xue straightened her face, seemingly a bit annoyed at the question.

"No."

"I am at least 10 times more of an expert of these things as you are with women. If I'm wrong, then I'll willingly lose my little baby over here to you."

"Even if you really did lose her to me, I won't dare to collect my prize." Lu Xiao Feng played along.

"Why not? Do you think she's ugly?" Madame Xue's eyes were wide in anger.

"Oh no, not ugly at all." Lu Xiao Feng smiled. "Just a bit on the mean side. Last time she nearly bit my entire ear off."

Xue Bing had been obediently standing there, not making the slightest sound. But now her face was flush red and her head bowed even deeper.

"All of you say she's mean, but when I look at her, not only is she not mean, but is nice and obedient like an angel!" Madame Xue smiled as well. She took Xue Bing's hand in hers. "My child, your only problem is that you are way too shy. What's there to blush about? Women biting men is something that's natural and right!"

Now even root of Xue Bing's ears were red with embarrassment.

"Why would I want to bite him? He stinks!" She lightly replied.

"If you didn't bite him, then how do you know he stinks?" Madame Xue laughed out loud.

"Mmmm!" Xue Bing let out a spoiled pout before running off in embarrassment. But even then she did not forget to secretly shoot a look towards Lu Xiao Feng and whisper. "Careful!"

Lu Xiao Feng watched her leave, seemingly mesmerized again.

"You want to chase after her don't you?" Madame Xue was smiling so wide that her eyes were little slits. "Well go then! What's stopping ya?"

Lu Xiao Feng hesitated, not taking his eyes off of that piece of red satin in her hand.

"What are you staring for? Do you actually think that I would keep it?" She laughed at Lu Xiao Feng and tossed the cloth back to him. "If there were two pieces, then I would be able to make a pair of shoes for that girl there, but there's only one...."

"What did you say you could make?" Lu Xiao Feng cut her off before she could finish.

"Shoes, what else. That's actually the surface cloth of a shoe."

Lu Xiao Feng seemed shocked again.

"Could you make a pair of red shoes?" He mumbled.

"Of course red shoes." Madame Xue laughed and shook her head in disbelief. "How could you make black shoes from red cloth? You look so smart, since when did you turn into an idiot?"

"Just then," Lu Xiao Feng sighed, "got scared into one."

"What are you scared of?"

"I'm scared that she's waiting outside the door to bite me!"

He really was bit as soon as he walked out of the door. Xue Bing was really waiting outside for him, and it was quite a bite.

"I'm turning into a regular soothsayer, I'm getting way too good at predicting things." Lu Xiao Feng tiredly laughed, fervently rubbing his ear.

"Well it's your fault you embarrassed me just then. And what were you trying to do saying that I won't take you here?" She furiously stared at him and angrily reprimanded. "If it wasn't for me, then how did you end up here? You are lucky I didn't really bite that ear of yours completely off."

All Lu Xiao Feng could do was keep his mouth shut. When a girl is fully intent on looking for trouble, the smart men would all keep their mouth shut tight.

Suddenly, Xue Bing snatched the red satin out of his hand.

"So tell me, who sewed this for you? Why are you treating it like some priceless treasure?"

"Because it is a priceless treasure."

"Priceless treasure my foot," Xue Bing sneered. "Looks to me like it's not even worth a single tael!"

"Well, this time you are wrong. It's worth at least 18 bushels of diamond studs, 800 thousand taels of silver, and 9000 pieces of gold leafs!"

"You have gone crazy!" Xue Bing stared at him with shock in her eyes.

"I haven't."

"If not, then why are you telling such preposterous lies?"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed. He knew even if he did not tell her now, sooner or later she would find out herself. So he decided that it was probably best to tell her himself right now.

Xue Bing silently listened to his story, her eyes began to glow as well as she listened.

"Other than this little goodie, there isn't any other clue?" She asked after he had finished.

"No."

"And that's why you are planning to go to the capital and visit this Lucky Omen shop to inquire about when they sold this piece of cloth and to whom? Am I right?"

"I'm just hoping that there hasn't been much red satin being sold recently."

"Textile shops and maker do seem to keep track of these things for at least a year." Xue Bing blinked and offered.

"That's why I must be on my way right now!"

"Good, we'll leave tomorrow!"

"We?" Lu Xiao Feng seemed surprised.

"We."

"And this 'we' includes you?"

"Of course!"

"Well, if this 'we' includes you, then it doesn't include me!" Lu Xiao Feng matter of factly told her.

"You don't want to take me there?" Xue Bing incredulously stared at him.

"No."

Xue Bing stared at him for a long time before her eyes suddenly rolled around for a bit.

"When Madame said something about red shoes just a bit earlier, you seemed to be surprised."

"Mm!"

"Did you see someone wearing red shoes?"

"There's a lot of people going around wearing red shoes!"

"But in that group there are some people who are special. Like, for example, some people that shouldn't be wearing red shoes, but still do wear a pair red shoes." The expression on Lu Xiao Feng's face changed. He had still not forgotten that the fake Golden Roc Emperor, even in death, was clutching a red shoe tightly in his hand.

"Do you know why these people wore red shoes?" Xue Bing casually asked, noticing the look on his face and knowing that she had him.

"No."

"Do you know who these people are who wear these red shoes? Do you know what kind of secret these red shoes have?"

"No."

"Well I do."

Lu Xiao Feng took a deep breath, his heart began to pick up speed again. This "secret of the red shoes" had truly moved him. But he did not ask. Because he knew that even if he asked now, Xue Bing would never answer it.

"Do you want to know these secrets?" Xue Bing casually asked, looking at him out the side of her eyes now.

"Yes."

"Well then, do you want to take me to the capital?"

"Yes!" Lu Xiao Feng exasperatingly smiled. "Very much so!"

Lu Xiao Feng really dislikes riding in carriages, he would rather ride

horses, or even walk. But at this moment he was sitting inside of a carriage, because Xue Bing likes it. Xue Bing had always been a very well mannered and shy girl, to the point where she would never take big steps while walking - at least she always liked to pretend to be like that.

Luckily, the carriage was very steady, because the road was very smooth. Highways leading to the capital were all very smooth. Sitting in the coach, Lu Xiao Feng was massaging his chin, because his chin was very sore. He suddenly realized that he seemed to be smiling and laughing meekly and tiredly way too often recently, so much so to the point where his chin was getting sore. Xue Bing was sitting on the other side, facing him, watching him; her eyes once again filled with that tenderness and joy that nobody could even hope to describe.

"Well, can you tell me the secret now?" Lu Xiao Feng could not restrain himself anymore.

"Secret? What secret?" Xue Bing amazingly looked like she had completely forgotten about this matter!

"The secret of the red shoes of course, what else?"

"Oh, that secret. It's not time to reveal that secret yet!!"

"When will it get to be time to reveal it?"

"When I'm happy, and I'm not very happy right now."

"Why aren't you happy?"

"Nobody would be happy if there's a huge idiot sitting across from them."

"Who's the idiot?"

"You."

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly realized that he was meekly laughing again.

"So what am I? A heartless low life? Or a huge idiot?"

"Both." Xue Bing leisurely laughed a little. "Because if you weren't a heartless low life, then there's no way you would treat me so terribly. And if you weren't a huge idiot, then you wouldn't waste a trip all the way to the capital!"

"Why am I an idiot for going to the capital?" Lu Xiao Feng was confused.

"Tell me, what do you plan on doing there?"

"You know exactly what I'm planning on doing!"

"To ask the vendors at Lucky Omen who bought this piece of satin right?"

"Correct!"

"Do you know how much pieces of cloth like this they sell every day? Even if somehow, they remember all of the sells, are you really planning on following up on every buyer?"

"But there can't that many that buy only red satin and black threads."

"And besides, this person had been doing all of these heists by himself. So he would naturally buy these commodities himself." Xue Bing added.

"Yes, this matter is very secretive to begin with, so it's most wise not to let a second person in on this!"

"But why do you think that she only bought black threads and red satin?" Xue Bing suddenly snickered.

"Because she only used these!"

"And that's why she could only purchase these 2 things and nothing else? Is there some law that's preventing her from buying more?"

"But she only used these 2 things!"

"And because she didn't use it, she couldn't buy it? Does she have to go and purchase huge amounts of black threads and red satin so as to attract other people's attention and make it easy for you?" Xue Bing coldly sneered. "Do you actually think that shes a huge idiot like you?"

Even Lu Xiao Feng could not responde to that.

"Because of how secretive and risky this matter is, then why would she leave such a huge and easy to follow clue for you to find? Even if she had left a miniscule clue there, by the time you make it to Lucky Omen you would probably find it burned to the ground."

Only after a long pause did Lu Xiao Feng finally gather himself and sighed.

"Well, it looks like I really am an idiot."

"And a heatless jerk!"

"And therefore it's pointless to go to the capital!"

"It would be a wasted trip anyways."

"If we are not going to the capital, then why did you want to get on this road earlier?"

"Because I know that there's a place with some great wine up ahead. And I know that you have always been a very generous guy and would surely invite me to a drink or two." Xue Bing cutely answered.

"Turns out not only am I an idiot and heartless, I have a good trait as well." Lu Xiao Feng laughed meekly. "At least I'm not miserly."

"As long as a man have that going for him, there would always be alot of girls liking him."

Pushing the curtains aside, a small river bank could be seen in the distance. In the willow forest, a green flag with the word "WINE" stuck out.

"This is the wine place." Xue Bing's eyes lit up.

"Pretty refined and elegant place!"

"And the wine is really good too; great, in fact!"

Looking at how her eyes lit up, Lu Xiao Feng could not help but smile.

"Since when did you become an alcoholic?"

"Recently."

"Haven't been feeling well recently?"

"Recently Madame would not allow me to drink, the more she forbids me, the more I want to, and besides...." She glanced toward Lu Xiao Feng and bitterly continued. "When we parted last time, I told you to come and visit, but you never did, so how could I be feeling well?"

Lu Xiao Feng did not dare to reply, because he knew if he did, his ear would probably get bit again.

He did not want to become a person who has only one ear. One ear really do not go well with four eye brows.

The place turned out to be really quite elegant. The little river snaked through the landscape, the willow caged them in green. Especially now, during dusk, when the green water of the river reflected the red glow of the sun onto people's faces, making them red like peach flowers. Beyond the willow trees were a couple of out houses. The wine tables were all placed outside on the sandy river bank with several bushes of cape jasmine planted nearby to further enhance the mood. Xue Bing suddenly discovered that this was not Lu Xiao Feng's first time here, he even knew where to go to relieve himself. Yet just a little while ago he pretended to have never even heard of this place.

"This jerk seemed to have actually learned how to act stupid now. Now what I'm suppose to do? This could be trouble." Xue Bing sighed. She decided that he was just like a fish, almost impossible to catch. It was probably best to try and figure out a couple of new and better ideas to use against him.

The waiter had walked up. He was a normal rural guy with vertical eye brows, horizontal eyes, and thick limbs.

"First give us 500 grams of Bamboo Green with 4 dishes of cold dishes, 4 more dishes of hot stir-fry. Then go to the back and kill an old hen for a soup." Actually she did not eat that much at all, but she liked to watch - quite a number of people liked to look at all the food laid out in front of them when they drink, Miss Xue was one of them.

"That much food for two people? Are you trying to stuff yourself to death?" The waiter shot a look at her and coldly said. Xue Bing was shocked, she certainly had never met a waiter like this before. The waiter snickered and continued on his rant. "A woman who eats too much would never get married, if you want to marry that little mustache over there, then it's best to not eat much. Or else he wouldn't be able to afford to feed you."

"Who are you?" Xue Bing was even more shocked. "Do you recognize that little mustache over there?"

That waiter's eyes rolled about for a while before he suddenly went down and whispered something in her ear. Xue Bing's eyes got bigger and bigger the more she listened to him until, finally, she could not control herself and let out a little laugh. Grabbing the waiter's arm, she whispered something back to him. The two of them looked quite friendly from the look of it. There were other costumers here besides her, and by now all of them were staring at her so much that their eyes were about to pop out of their sockets.

A shy, well mannered, elegant, and refined beauty like her would actually act so intimate with this farmer looking waiter? Xue Bing did not seem to care how weird everyone else found this to be, the waiter seemed to care even less. Finally, after having cleared out the commodities in his belly, Lu Xiao Feng returned, seemingly very unhappy.

"We are about to drink, why aren't you happy?" Xue Bing's eyes were vibrant with activity. Lu Xiao Feng responded with a cold snicker and a straight face.

"When did you learn to get so friendly with men in public?" He had to ask.

"Men?" Xue Bing blinked. "What men?"

"That waiter just then was a man was he not?" Lu Xiao Feng kept a straight face. No man would be happy to see the girl that he was accompanying getting friendly with another man.

"You really are an idiot aren't you?" Xue Bing laughed and whispered to him. "I act a little friendlier toward him now, and later on when he gives us the bill, it'll be a little bit cheaper. You understand that logic don't you?"

But Lu Xiao Feng did not understand, Xue Bing was not this type of a girl.

By now that waiter had returned with cups and chop sticks.

"Bang!" He roughly placed the cups onto the table and shot a bitter look at Lu Xiao Feng.

"Such a pretty flower, why is it wasted on this pile of bullshit?" He mumbled to himself. This time even Lu Xiao Feng was rendered speechless. Just what was this waiter on? Xue Bing was covering her mouth so as to not laugh out loud.

Lu Xiao Feng watched that waiter walk off and suddenly laughed as well. He was just about to say something when he suddenly noticed a

man walking drunkenly over, barely able to keep from falling over. He had a wine cup in one hand and patted Lu Xiao Feng on his shoulder with the other.

"I recognize you, we have met before." He said with a silly smile on his face.

All Lu Xiao Feng could do was smile along. He did actually meet this man, met him at somebody's banquet on some particular occasion. He still remembered that his name was Sun Zhong, heard he was pretty famous in the pugilistic world too. That time, like this time, he was intoxicated to the point that his tongue was swollen.

Lu Xiao Feng had two principles. He does not go and bother sober people when he is drunk, and when he is sober he does not go and bother drunk people.

But Sun Zhong wanted to bother him, so much so that he actually sat down.

"I still even remember this mustache of yours, but I don't remember your name."

It was probably for the best that he did not remember. But Lu Xiao Feng did not tell him that, of course.

Sun Zhong suddenly turned his head and stared at Xue Bing.

"This little lady that you have with you is quite something else you

know, just like a narcissus flower, if you squeeze it water would come out." So it turned out that he came for Xue Bing. When he saw how friendly Xue Bing was with that waiter, he could not help but be tempted as well. Xue Bing blushed and bowed her head, seemingly too shy to even lift her eye lids.

"My friend, you seem to drunk, why don't you get some rest?" Lu Xiao Feng sighed. He really did not want any trouble, for himself or Sun Zhong. Nobody has ever troubled "Cold Ruskha" and came out better for the wear. But it seemed as if Sun Zhong did not even hear him and continued to stare at Xue Bing. Suddenly he forcefully patted Lu Xiao Feng on his shoulder again.

"My friend, I gotta give it to you. If you let me have this girl for today, then you could always come to me if you ever get in trouble in the martial world."

Lu Xiao Feng, incredibly, was able to keep his cool.

"I won't run into any problems," He replied matter of factly. "But it looks like you are about to have some, my advice to you is...."

"I'm giving you face by asking you!" Sun Zhong did not even let him finish before shouting back in his face. "Are you going to yield?"

"Why don't you ask her yourself?" Lu Xiao Feng gave up and sighed.

"I don't need to ask, I know she likes me." Sun Zhong laughed loudly. "What do you have that I'm not better at?"

Xue Bing's face turned even redder, her face bowed even lower, looking ever more beautiful and innocent.

"Little miss, how about you and I have a little drink over there?" Sun Zhong was practically drooling. Blushing, all Xue Bing could do was shook her head.

"Well you have to whether you want to or not!" Sun Zhong actually reached out and took Xue Bing's hand in his own.

"Can you let go of my hand?" Xue Bing lowered her head even more and quietly asked.

"No!" Sun Zong laughed and replied.

"You absolutely won't?" Xue Bing asked, her face suddenly turning pale.

"Even if you cut my hand off, I won't let go!"

"Good!" She suddenly grabbed the sabre attached to Sun Zhong's waist. As soon as he saw her face turn pale, Lu Xiao Feng knew something was not right. He was just about to say something, but by that time the sabre had already been unsheathed. With a sabre flying through his view, Sun Zhong seemed to sober up a bit as well as he tried to snatch the sabre back. With a flash, his hand had been cut off and flopped onto the ground, dripped with blood.

His pupil suddenly dilated and his eyes bulged out as he stared at his own cut off hand and looked back up at Xue Bing, seemingly not able to believe what had just taken place. And at the moment when he finally began to believe it, he collapsed onto the ground accompanied by a blood curdling scream. An intoxicated man always reacted a bit slower. Only now were his friends, who had been happily crouching on the other side of the place, charging furiously over.

"Why did you cut off his hand?" Lu Xiao Feng frowned, purposefully not paying any attention to the men charging at him.

"He told me to!" Xue Bing answered with an angry face.

"But he's drunk!"

"But he's still a person."

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly snatched the sabre from out of her hand and, gently putting the blade between two of his fingers, lightly flicked.

"Beng!" The steel sabre snapped in two. He followed it up by doing it again.

Using only those two fingers and a couple of light flicks, a sabre that had been made from steel that had been smelt and refined 100 times over was reduced to 10 small pieces.

"Weird, how could trash like this cut off someone's hand?" He frowned. Those men who were charging at him had collectively come to stop,

utterly shocked and not quite believing at the display that they just saw.

"Friend, what's your name?" One of them finally asked.

"My surname is Lu!"

"Lu as in road?"

"Lu as in Lu Xiao Feng!"

"You... you are Lu Xiao Feng?" The dumbfounded faces had been replaced by sickly green faces. Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

Nobody spoke another word as they picked up their man on the ground, turned around, and began to file out.

"Not recognizing Lu Xiao Feng, you deserve to have both of your hand cut off!"

"So it seems like the words Lu Xiao Feng could fend off evil as well, who knew?" Xue Bing sweetly laughed.

"I knew you were trouble all along," Lu Xiao Feng was exasperated and sighed. "I shouldn't have brought you along!"

"Was that his fault or mine?"

"But you shouldn't have cut his hand off."

"He told me to!"

"He was drunk!"

"And does being drunk give him the right to bully others around?"

"Drunk people are still people," The waiter just happened to be coming with the food and wine and commented. "This kind of people deserves to be cut at least 180 times."

"That's right, at least you are reasonable!" Xue Bing sweetly replied.

"Hmph!" The waiter, once again, roughly placed the tray carrying the food and wine onto the table and walked off, not even looking in Lu Xiao Feng's direction at all.

"And a person like you deserves to be cut at least 360 times." Lu Xiao Feng coldly declared. His face darkened as he suddenly attacked. He picked up a section of the blade with two of his fingers and sent it howling towards the back of the waiter. The waiter did not even turn around but instead took off, as if he had suddenly grew a pair of wings. How could a waiter at a wine place like this have such great martial arts ability?

"I knew you didn't look like a good guy, turns out you are a flying criminal!" Lu Xiao Feng snickered. He flicked his hand and another section of the blade flew like lightning towards the waiter's waist. The

waiter was in midair with nothing around him to avoid or deflect the attack. Lu Xiao Feng's attack was truly too fast, it looked as if there was no way he could get out of the way.

"Are you really going to kill him?" Xue Bing asked despite of herself.

"Don't worry, he won't die." Lu Xiao Feng coldly replied. Before he even finished that reply, the waiter had already somersaulted three times in midair, caught the section of the sabre, and gently floated back down onto the ground.

Xue Bing stared at him, then stared at Lu Xiao Feng, and then burst out with a bright smile.

"So you already knew who he is!"

"I only know he's criminal!" Lu Xiao Feng put up a serious face.

"If I'm criminal, then what are you?" The waiter suddenly laughed.

"A particular criminal's daddy!"

This waiter did not even go and bring any more dishes, but instead sat down.

"Shame that you are not law breaking material, the most you could do was dig up a couple of earth worms!"

"Digging worms?" Xue Bing blinked.

"Oh you didn't know?" The waiter laughed. "He's not very good at other things, but is an expert at earth worm excavation. In 10 days he actually dug up 680 worms for me!"

"What did you need all those worms for?" Xue Bing could not help but wonder.

"I did not need one single worm, I just liked watching him dig for worms." Xue Bing laughed.

"Have you seen him dig for worms?"

"No!"

"Oh had I known that earlier I would have invited you to have a look as well." The waiter sighed. "When he dig for worms, that pose and style is just too perfect. Graceful and elegant you know, puts even the best opera singers to shame. It's really quite a shame you missed out on it."

"No worries, there's always next time." Xue Bing managed to stop laughing long enough to reply.

"There's a next time?" The waiter wondered.

"Of course!" Xue Bing answered with a straight face. "Earth worm excavation is like drinking wine: addictive! Once a person dig worms

once, you can't stop him from digging more even if you want to!"

"The next time I dig up some worms, I'll be sure to stuff all of them in your mouth!" Lu Xiao Feng coldly interrupted.

That waiter that was on something was, of course, none other than Si Kong Zhai Xing.

The other customers had long been frightened away. So the three of them actually ended up with quite a peaceful little place for chat. The only one who was suffering was the boss that ran this little wine shop.

"You were having such a good time being a thief, why are you changing into the wine selling line of work?" Xue Bing inquired while pouring a cup of wine for Si Kong Zhai Xing.

"Because he's addicted too!" Lu Xiao Feng answered instead. He still had not forgotten the last time when Si Kong Zhai Xing disguised himself as Pot Face Zhao. That kind of thing was not something that one forgets.

"Last time I fooled you, but doesn't seem like I did this time." Si Kong Zhai Xing laughed.

"Doesn't seem like you were really trying to fool me this time either." Lu Xiao Feng stared directly into Si Kong Zhai Xing's eyes. No waiter in the world could have such a huge attitude problem. If he was not purposefully trying to get Lu Xiao Feng's attention, then why would he act like that?

"Ever since last time when you charged into a raging inferno to save Pot Face Zhao, I suddenly discovered that you are quite a nice friend to have!" Si Kong Zhai Xing suddenly sighed.

"But yet you still made me go and dig worms for you."

"What are you? Afraid that others don't know about that?" Si Kong Zhai Xing laughed again. "Everywhere you go, everyone you meet, you have to bring that up!"

"So you have already met Hua Man Lou and Jin Jiu Ling?" Lu Xiao Feng's eyes lit up.

"Mm!"

"And they told you that I would was going to look for Xue Bing?"

Si Kong Zhai Xing nodded.

"So you figured that we must past through this place and stop here for a drink?"

"So I waited here!"

"Waited here just to drink some wine?"

"You know that's not it, and I don't want to lie to you!" Si Kong Zhai Xing

suddenly sighed.

"I only know that we are friends."

"Weird thing is, there just happen to be alot of people who want me to steal something of yours!" Si Kong Zhai Xing sighed.

"What is it now?"

"Do you have a piece of red satin on you?"

"You know I have it, and I don't want to lie to you." Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"And is there a black peony embroidered on that red piece of satin?"

"Is this piece of cloth what you are here to steal?"

"Correct."

"You have already admitted we are friends, and yet you are still going to rob me?"

"Because I have already promised someone!"

"Why did you make that promise?"

"I had to!"

"Why?"

"Because I owed this person a favor!"

"Who is this person?"

"You know I won't tell you, why ask?" Si Kong Zhai Xing let out a tired smile.

"You seem to owe me a favor too." Lu Xiao Feng laughed. "Not only did I save you, I dug up 680 worms for you as well."

"And that's why I'm being honest and telling you this right now!"

"But even though you told me, you are still going to steal from me?"

"A piece of red satin like that is not worth much of anything."

"And you never steal anything that's worth anything anyways!"

"Since you have already seen it, you don't have much use for it anymore do you?"

"Do you actually want me to just hand it over to you?"

"That's exactly what I'm trying to say!"

Lu Xiao Feng blinked.

"Why don't we make a deal?"

"What kind of deal?" Si Kong Zhai Xing asked.

"As long as you tell me who asked you to steal it from me, I'll let you steal it!"

"No can do on that deal!"

"Well, if we can't make a deal, then all that's left to do is to bet." Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"How do we bet?"

"Do you know how many guest rooms there are in the back?"

"Six."

"I'll stay the night here tonight and wait for you to come and steal it from me!"

"If you know I'm coming to steal it, how can I possibly succeed?" Si Kong Zhai Xing frowned.

"You are the King of Thieves, remember?" Lu Xiao Feng laughed. "Never failed trying to steal anything. I'm sure you'll come up with something."

"And what if I really do have a plan to steal it away?" Si Kong Zhai Xing's eyes suddenly began to glow.

"The thing is with me right now, if you can steal it away, then I'll be perfectly willing to dig up another 680 worms for you!"

"I can use whatever method I want?"

"Of course. Whatever you want!"

"Some methods I would rather not use on a friend!"

"Well, for tonight only, you can stop considering me as your friend!"

"Alright! The bet is one!" Si Kong Zhai Xing suddenly picked up a cup and finished its contents in one gulp. "And if I lose, I'll be perfectly willing to dig up worms for you as well!"

"I don't want you to dig worms!"

"Do you still want me to kneel down and call you 'Uncle!' everytime I

see you?"

"This time, the ante is upped to 'Daddy!'" Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"Alright! It's a deal!"

"And whoever backs out is a son of a turtle!"

"Well, looks like no matter who wins, I'm in for a treat!" Xue Bing laughed and happily observed.

"But it's not night yet." Si Kong Zhai Xing observed.

"So we are still friends!"

"So I'm going to invite you to a drink!"

"I only hope that you didn't put any poison in the drinks." Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"And I only hope that you don't get me smashed!" Si Kong Zhai Xing smiled in return.

Chapter 3 - You Cheat I Lie

Night. But night not yet deep. Si Kong Zhai Xingg was not smashed, and already left. Lu Xiao Feng, of course, was not poisoned, Si Kong Zhai Xing was not the type to put poison in wine. Besides, even if he did use poison, Lu Xiao Feng would not have drank it.

But there were the hints of a smile on Xue Bing's face.

"He lost for sure this time!" She suddenly sighed.

"He lost for sure?"

"The object is on you, and you know that he's coming to steal it. How could he steal it?"

"He's the King of Thieves, and a King of Thieves would surely have all kinds of strange and bizarre ways to steal things!"

"Are you really not sure that you'll be able to beat him?" Xue Bing asked.

Lu Xiao Feng laughed a little and poured himself a drink. But he did not drink it, he only stared at it, as if fascinated by it.

"What are you thinking about? The person that wanted him to steal it

from you?" Xue Bing asked.

Lu Xiao Feng did not deny this.

"Could the person that wanted him to steal this be the same person that sewed it?" Xue Bing asked.

"Very possible."

"If I was you, I would rack my brain to try and come up with ways to make him tell you!"

"You are not me!"

"Good thing too," Xue Bing sweetly smiled. "I don't have all that worries and troubles that you have!"

"And that's why are you very happy!"

"Yes, very happy!"

"Well, since you are happy, you are going to tell me right?" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly smiled.

"Tell you what?" Xue Bing seemed to have forgotten about it again.

"About red shoes, of course!"

Xue Bing blinked a couple of times, and figured that she could not put off this anymore.

"Do you know about GreenShirtMansion?" She suddenly asked.

Lu Xiao Feng nodded. Of course he knew.

"Well Red Shoes is like GreenShirtMansion, a very secretive organization. The only place where it's different from GreenShirtMansion is that there are no men in the organization. So it's more vicious and more powerful than GreenShirtMansion!"

"Why?"

"Because woman are more powerful than man to begin with." Xue Bing laughed and cleverly answered.

"And?"

"And nothing, that's it."

"That's it?" Lu Xiao Feng almost jumped out of his skin. "What do you mean that's it?"

"That's it means that's all I know." Xue Bing casually replied. "It means that even if you put a knife up to my neck, I can't tell you anymore."

Lu Xiao Feng was speechless and just looked at her stupidly for a while.

"Women are more powerful than men," he sighed, "they don't play fair!"

"Since when have been playing unfair?" Xue Bing glared at him. "Did I not just tell you what all these people who wear red shoes are? Did I not also tell you that Red Shoes is a very secretive organization? Are you not satisfied?"

"Turns out not only do they play unfair, they are self-righteous." Lu Xiao Feng meekly smiled.

"Well, you know that this big bearded embroider is actually a woman in disguise right?" Xue Bing seemed a bit embarrassed about it as well and blinked a couple of times. "And you also know that she wears red shoes. You know quite a bit actually!"

"And that's why I'm satisfied." Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "Very satisfied!"

"Well, since you are satisfied, why don't you pour me a drink?" Xue Bing smiled.

"Your face is redder than those red shoes that they wear," Lu Xiao Feng coldly replied. "And you still want more?"

"I want to get drunk tonight anyways," Xue Bing bit her lip. "Besides, there's a bed here, if I get smashed I'll just go and lie on the bed."

"Don't forget that I'm in this room as well!"

"So what if you are in the room?" Xue Bing glanced at him out of the corner of her eyes. "Am I suppose to be scared of you?"

"Are you actually trying to get drunk so you can summon up enough courage to seduce me?" Lu Xiao Feng glanced at her out of the corner of his eyes as well.

Xue Bing blushed again, but this time she did not bow her head but instead stared straight into his eyes.

"Do you actually not want me to seduce you?"

"Have you been planning to seduce me from the beginning?"

"Who do you think you are? Fan An? Song Yu?"

{Note: Fan An and Song Yu are notorious lady's men and playboys in stories.}

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly stood up.

"What do you think you are doing?" Xue Bing demanded.

"I stood up, so it naturally follows that I'm going to leave!"

"Do you really want to leave?"

"Well since you aren't going to seduce me, then what's the point of my staying here?"

"Pch!" Xue Bing let out a little laugh.

"You are such a dummy. I'm not seducing you, but couldn't you seduce me?"

"Too bad I'm not use to seducing others, it's always been others seducing me!"

"Can't you make an exception for me?" Xue Bing said barely above an whisper. Her face became even redder, redder even than the peach flowers in Spring, red just like honey peaches. Lu Xiao Feng suddenly sighed and slowly sat back down.

"What are you scared of?" Xue Bing looked at him and teased. "You haven't even began enticing me yet and you are already sweating up a storm!"

"Because I feel very hot!"

"I seem to be feeling pretty hot too!"

"But you are snow and ice, how could you be feeling hot?" Lu Xiao Feng

joked.

{Note: Lu Xiao Feng makes a joke on Xue Bing's name here. "Xue" is a homophone of snow and "Bing" means ice in English.}

"I'm confused as well, why do I feel hot?" She blinked a couple of times and suddenly clapped her hands in realization. "I got it!"

"What do you get?"

"Si Kong Zhai Xing might not have put poison into the win, but did put in a type of drug that heats us up to try and make you feel as if you are baking!"

"And if we feel hot, then we would have to take our clothes off."

"The object is on you, and if you take your cloth off, that would give him the chance that he needs!"

"I'm just wondering how in the world could the King of Thieves use such an idiotic method!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"It might be idiotic, but it's very effective!"

"Too bad that the object was not on me at all," Lu Xiao Feng laughed and matter of factly said. "So he couldn't steal it away anyways!"

"Did you already hide that thing somewhere else?" Xue Bing asked after being startled by the revelation.

"Hid it at a place that he would never think of in a million years." Lu Xiao Feng laughed. "Even if he had 30 hands, all he could steal from me here is a couple piece of my crappy clothes."

"You are so bad!" Xue Bing giggled.

"Always been."

There was a person perched at the top of the roof across the way. Of course, he was none other than Si Kong Zhai Xing. At this moment, he was cursing Lu Xiao Feng in his mind.

"This little jerk really is a bastard!" He had amazingly forgotten that he himself was a bastard as well, someone who was not a bastard would never hide on roof tops and eavedrop on other people.

"Where did this little bastard hide it?" Si Kong Zhai Xing began going over the places where Lu Xiao Feng went today. They had began drinking outside and, when it got to be about time, they moved inside. Other than these 2 places, Lu Xiao Feng only went to relieve himself once!

"Could he have hid it in the out house?" That was a very good possibility, this Lu Xiao Feng bastard was capable of anything.

"Or maybe he hid it in the wine jug, somewhere that he thinks I would never expect!"

By now Lu Xiao Feng had already taken off his outer robe and casually laid it on the back of the chair by the window. The window was not closed. The thing would obviously not be in that robe, or else he would never be so careless with it!

Lu Xiao Feng was not a careless person, and digging out 680 worms was not exactly fun either. Si Kong Zhai Xing had decided to leave. He was just about to stand up but he stopped and his eyes lit up. If Lu Xiao Feng had actually hid the thing inside the robe, then is it not a place that he would expect even less? Did he purposefully say those words for Si Kong Zhai Xing to hear?

"This little bastard is a little fox!" Si Kong Zhai Xing laughed to himself. "But too bad that today you ran into an old fox!"

His smile was making him look quite a bit like an old fox.

The robe was just hanging there on the back of the chair, he could see it, but not touch it. So what was he to do? Of course this old fox had his ways. "King of Thieves" was not a title that he stole. Sounds of laughter emanated from within the room, what are they feeling so giddy about?

"Are they laughing at an idiot outside tasting the wind, watching them drink wine?"

Si Kong Zhai Xing suddenly jumped off of the roof, pushed open the door, and walked in. Xue Bing's eyes were about to pop out of their sockets as she looked at him in surprise, as if she could not even imagine in her dreams that this person would suddenly appear. Lu Xiao Feng

would not be able to either.

But Si Kong Zhai Xing just ignored them, sat down, and helped himself to a cup of wine.

"Well, drinking wine definitely feels better than tasting the wind." He mumbled to himself.

"Who made you go out into the wind?" Xue Bing smiled.

"Myself!"

"Are you a big idiot just like him?" Xue Bing blinked and laughed.

"Even if I'm not an idiot, I'm at least an air head."

"You admit that you are an air head?" Xue Bing trying to contain her laughter.

"Well if I'm not an air head, then why would I get into this bet with him?" Si Kong Zhai Xing sighed.

"You don't think it's worth it?"

Si Kong Zhai Xing nodded.

"And that's why the bet is off!"

"The bet is off?" Lu Xiao Feng almost screamed. "What do you mean the bet is off?"

"The bet is off means that the bet is off!"

"But we had an agreement!"

"Lots of agreement are went back upon later. And alot of spoken words could be treated like farts!"

"I don't get it," Lu Xiao Feng meekly smiled after staring at him dumbfounded for a while. "Why are you suddenly calling the bet off?"

"You don't think I know what kind of shit you are trying to pull?" Si Kong Zhai Xing sneered.

"What kind of shit am I trying to pull?"

"You are going to let me steal the thing and then follow me to see how I give this thing to." Si Kong Zhai Xing sneered. "That way, even though I win, I still come out on the short end!"

"How did you come up with that notion?" Lu Xiao Feng looked like an innocent kid. "I don't get it."

"You get it, you get it better than anyone!"

"Why would I let you win on purpose?" Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "Do you actually think that I like digging for worms?"

"Because you really want to find out who want me to steal the thing off of you. And to do that, this is the only way. To get what you want, you'll resort to anything!"

"Do you really think I'm that kind of a person?" Lu Xiao Feng meekly smiled.

"I don't care what kind of person you are, I'm not going through with this bet with you anymore. Because I have made up my mind that I'm not going to fall for your ploy!" He poured another cup and downed it in one gulp. Afterwards, he reared back and loudly laughed 3 times. "Excellent wine! Taste much better than wind!"

He was not even finished speaking those words by the time he made his way out of the door.

Lu Xiao Feng watched him leave, and sat dumbfounded for a while before suddenly breaking out into a smile.

"This guy really is an old fox!"

"Were you really going to let him win?" Xue Bing had to ask.

"The old fox was right, this really is the only way that I can find out who

gave him this job!" Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"And all those things you said earlier was to precisely tell him where the thing is?"

"Exactamundo!"

"But I still can't figure out exactly where you hid it!" Xue Bing sighed.

"The thing was hid in my clothes!"

"In this robe on the chair?" Xue Bing was quite taken aback.

"Had been all along!"

"But you just said earlier..."

"I said that because I know that sooner or later he would figure out that I was hoping to distract his attention!"

"I still don't get it."

"I purposefully just casually laid my robe there, of course others won't suspect that the thing was in there. But he's not just anybody, he's the 'King of Thieves'!"

"So you figured that he sooner or later he would figure out that the

thing was in there!"

"I put it there for him to steal to begin with!"

"So it turns out that you had a trick inside of another trick." Xue Bing finally understood. "After all of that, you were still trying to let him steal it!"

"Yes, I wanted him to steal it, but I can't make it too easy for him because I can't allow him to get suspicious!"

"But he still got suspicious and did not fall for it!"

"That's why I say he's really truly an old fox," Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "Too bad though...."

"What's too bad?"

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly let out a little laugh.

"Too bad he still fell for it in the end!"

Xue Bing was taken aback for a moment before smiling meekly.

"I don't get it again."

"He still stole the thing!"

"When did he steal it?"

"Just now!"

Xue Bing could not help but to take that robe in her hand and shook it a bit. A piece of red satin fell from within its folds, on it was sewn a black peony.

"Isn't it still here?"

"But this piece of satin is not the original one anymore!"

"You are telling me that he switched this piece of satin with that piece of yours?"

"Look at it carefully, isn't there some differences between the 2?"

The differences were not obvious, but they were still there.

"He probably already found out from Jin Jiu Ling what the piece of satin and the embroidery looked like, then he found someone to make sew one just like it to switch it with me!"

"He was so quick, no wonder he's the 'King of Thieves'!" Xue Bing sighed. "I was watching him the entire time just now and did not see how he did it."

"He probably thinks I didn't see it either." Lu Xiao Feng smiled. "He probably figures that I still don't know!"

"You have already inspected this satin countless number of time. And now since it hasn't been stolen, you would surely hide it somewhere. Either way, you definitely would not be taking it out any time soon!"

"That's why he figures that I would not realize that this was a fake any time soon!"

"And now, since he's gotten what he wanted, he would surely try and give it to his benefactor!"

"He has to finish his job, after all!"

"Then why aren't you following him right now?"

"Because I know that there's no way he'll leave right now!"

"Why not?"

"Because he's afraid that I might get suspicious as well!"

Xue Bing thought about it for a bit.

"It's not like you are going to find out about the switch any time soon,

so he might as well take this opportunity and relax some!”

“The more relaxed he is, the less likely I’m going to get suspicious!”

“And once we leave tomorrow morning, he could actually send us out on our way and then gingerly go back and finish his job!”

“Looks like if you hang around us anymore, you’ll end up being a little fox as well!” Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

Xue Bing’s eyes rolled around for a bit and an expression that was sort of a smile but not really a smile appeared on her face.

“So what do you want to do now?” She asked him in a voice barely above whisper.

“Well, naturally, I’m going to keep him company!” Lu Xiao Feng purposefully ignored her expression.

“You are going to leave me here to keep him company!” Xue Bing looked as if she was about to jump up once again.

“He won’t try to seduce me, I won’t try to seduce him either.” Lu Xiao Feng matter of factly replied. “I’m much safer in his company!”

Xue Bing bit her lip and bitterly glared at him. Suddenly, she broke out in a teasing smile.

"At last, I figured out what you are!"

"Oh? What am I?"

"You are a dog!"

"How am I a dog?" Lu Xiao Feng asked with an incredulous smile.

"If Si Kong Zhai Xing is an old fox, then doesn't that make you a fox-biting dog?" Xue Bing teased.

Si Kong Zhai Xing was lying in bed, using his own arms as a pillow. He was focused on the cup of wine that was on his chest. Lu Xiao Feng always liked to drink wine like this, not only that, when Lu Xiao Feng drinks like this, he does not spill a single drop of wine. If it was something that Lu Xiao Feng could do, then Si Kong Zhai Xing must learn it, not just learn it but master it better than Lu Xiao Feng.

He suddenly heard someone laughing outside of his door.

"That's my trick and mine alone. You'll never learn it!" A man pushed open the door and walked in. Lu Xiao Feng, of course.

Si Kong Zhai Xing did not turn at his comment but instead remained completely focused on that cup of wine on top of his chest.

"What are you up to now?" He coldly demanded.

"Up to? No, I'm only here to keep you company!"

"You are leaving her alone to keep me company?"

"Is the bet off now?" Instead of answering his question, Lu Xiao Feng laughed and asked a question of his own.

"Uh huh!"

"So we are still friends?"

"Uh huh!"

"Well, since we are friends, then why shouldn't I come and keep you company?"

"Of course you could, but now I think I'm going to go and keep her company!" Si Kong Zhai Xing suddenly inhaled deeply. The wine cup on his chest immediately flew onto his lips and the wine inside of the cup flew into his mouth as well. Unfortunately, not all of the wine flew into his mouth, the other half of the wine spilled all over his entire body.

"I told you," Lu Xiao Feng laughed heartily at his friend's misfortune. "You won't master that move even if you tried a life time!"

Si Kong Zhai Xing gave Lu Xiao Feng a fierce glare before he started to get up. Suddenly, his complexion changed dramatically as his entire face tightened and began to twitch. His entire body was twitching, as if a thin blade had just been stabbed into his stomach.

"What's the matter?" Even Lu Xiao Feng was shocked by this turn of events. Si Kong Zhai Xing opened his mouth, trying to speak, but nothing came out. Lu Xiao Feng immediately ran to his side and helped him sit up. Suddenly, he caught a whiff of a strange scent.

He picked up that wine cup and sniffed. His expression changed dramatically.

"There's poison in this cup!" By now Si Kong Zhai Xing's face was deathly pale and huge beads of sweat were collecting on his forehead.

"Where did the wine come from? Was anybody here earlier?" Lu Xiao Feng inquired.

Si Kong Zhai Xing barely managed to shook his head a little and stared at the wine flask sitting on the table. There was still some wine in the flask.

Lu Xiao Feng grabbed the flask and sniffed it, the wine in the flask was not poisonous.

"The poison is on the cup!" The cup had probably always been in this room. Just then when Si Kong Zhai Xing was eavesdropping on the roof, somebody must have came here and put something on the cup.

"You were always such a careful guy!" Lu Xiao Feng stumped his feet in frustration. "Why are you so thoughtless now!"

Si Kong Zhai Xing gritted his teeth and finally squeezed three words out of his mouth.

"Still Dusk Convent!"

"You know somebody there who can heal you? You want me to take you there?"

"Quick... quickly..." Si Kong Zhai Xing struggled to nodded a little.

"Alright, I'll go find Xue Bing, we'll take you there together!" Lu Xiao Feng picked Si Kong Zhai Xing up and charged out, looking for Xue Bing.

But Xue Bing was no where to be found. That unfinished cup of wine that she was drinking earlier was still on the table, but she had disappeared into thin air. On the plate that used to have some chopped beef was now placed a pair of hands, a pair of severed hands! Lu Xiao Feng recognized that they were Sun Zhong's hands. Could he have organized some people and returned for revenge and actually took Xue Bing away with them? But how could they have not heard anything next door?

Xue Bing was not an easy customer, how could she be taken away so easily? Lu Xiao Feng did not have time to think these things out in detail. At the moment, everything had to be put on hold, the most important

thing was to save Si Kong Zhai Xing. Besides, this turn of events was too shocking, too unimaginable. No matter how much he tried, he would not be able to figure it out anyways. Fortunately, the carriage that they had rode in on was still here.

Lu Xiao Feng woke up the driver and hopped onto the carriage with, by now, a seemingly completely immobile Si Kong Zhai Xing.

"You can't die, you are not a good man, how can your life be so short?" He mumbled to him, and to himself.

Miraculously, Si Kong Zhai Xing did not die and held on in this half dead state all the way to Still Dusk Convent.

Still Dusk Convent was situated within a black bamboo forest, a black bamboo forest on the side of the mountain. The gate to the mountain was open, but human world was forever left behind, outside of the bamboo forest. It was impossible for the carriage to go up the mountain side, so Lu Xiao Feng, carrying the unconscious Si Kong Zhai Xing, made his way through the bamboo forest, stepping quietly over the fallen leaves. Along with the breeze came the last stroke of the night bell. But night had not fallen yet, the setting sun's color filled the entire sky, it was dusk.

"You made it! It was hard but you made it!" Lu Xiao Feng mumbled as he looked down at the Si Kong Zhai Xing in his arms, trying to catch his breath. Si Kong Zhai Xing's body shuddered slightly and he gently groaned, as if he had heard Lu Xiao Feng's words.

"How are you feeling?" Lu Xiao Feng immediately asked.

"I'm starving!" Si Kong Zhai Xing suddenly flung open his eyes.

"You are starving?" Lu Xiao Feng was startled.

"Yeah, these last two days you went off the carriage to eat and drink to your hearts content and all I could do was hide inside the carriage chewing through cold cookie dough. How could I not be starving?" Si Kong Zhai Xing winked at Lu Xiao Feng. Lu Xiao Feng was speechless. He looked like he had just swallowed 600 live worms.

"Careful how you carry me, don't drop me ok?" Si Kong Zhai Xing instructed.

"Oh I'll be careful, but I'm just afraid that it won't kill you!" Lu Xiao Feng winked. He suddenly lifted Si Kong Zhai Xing above his head and slammed his body down towards the ground. But before Si Kong Zhai Xing hit the ground, he suddenly flipped in mid air. In fact, he did 7 or 8 flips in a role and gently landed on the ground. He took one look at Lu Xiao Feng and began to laugh, laugh so hard that he doubled over.

"I should have let you die right there!" Lu Xiao Feng bitterly declared.

"Only the good die young, how could a man like me die?" Si Kong Zhai Xing was still laughing. He actually just admitted that he was not a good man.

"You were not poisoned were you?"

"Of course not, who could poison an immortal old fox like me?"

"That poison on the wine cup was something you put there yourself?"

"That was not poison to begin with!" Si Kong Zhai Xing laughed triumphantly. "It was just some scented herbs that smells like poison. But nothing will happen even if you ingest 1 kilogram of it."

"You pretended to be poisoned so as to keep me busy and make me take you here."

"If I don't do that, then how else could I get the thing out of that place?"

"How did you get the thing out of there? This entire time you pretended to be on the verge of death and did not move a hair!"

"I have my ways. Don't forget, not only am I the "King of Thieves", I'm an clever old fox too!"

"But if it wasn't for a little fox, this job probably would not be anywhere near this easy!" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly snickered.

"Little fox?" Si Kong Zhai Xing seemed to be surprised at the revelation. "Other than you, is there another little fox?"

"Maybe not a little fox, but certainly a female fox!" Lu Xiao Feng sneered.

"I knew I couldn't keep you in the dark forever!" Si Kong Zhai Xing burst out laughing again. "You are not that stupid after all!"

"When did you make this arrangement with Xue Bing?"

"When you went off to relieve yourself!"

"Why would she go along with your plan?"

"Maybe because she fallen for me!" Si Kong Zhai Xing matter of factly said.

"She would fall for an old fox like you?"

"I see you don't understand, all women love old foxes!" Si Kong Zhai Xing laughed at himself.

"Looks like she really has been hypnotized by one of your evil methods, so much so that she was actually capable of doing such a thing!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed but then suddenly asked another question. "If she went off to complete the job for you and give the thing to the owner, then what was that pair of severed hands doing there?"

"Severed hands?" Si Kong Zhai Xing seemed to be caught off guard. "What severed hands?"

"That hand that was cut off of Sun Zhong!"

"Where was that hand?"

"On the plate that had beef on it!"

"I don't know anything about that!" Si Kong Zhai Xing frowned and shook his head.

"You really don't know?"

"When have I ever lied to you?" Si Kong Zhai Xing sighed.

"You have always lied to me!" Lu Xiao Feng bittered replied.

"A genius like you? How could I ever get you to believe in my lies?" Si Kong Zhai Xing blinked.

"You shouldn't be able to," Lu Xiao Feng could not help himself and sighed again. Smiling meekly, he continued. "But pity that I am just too nice of a guy."

"Is that nice man outside Lu Xiao Feng?" A person suddenly asked from behind the gate.

The gate was half closed, inside the door was a small little yard with a person sitting in a bamboo chair underneath the white poplar trees in the yard. The dusk sun shoned down upon lonely white poplar tree, and also shoned upon his pale face. His nose was straight and his forehead pertruded out, anybody could see in one glance that he must be a

powerful and dignified person. But where those bright and shining eyes of his used to be, now there were only two black holes.

"Jiang Chong Wei!" Lu Xiao Feng shouted in surprise as he entered the yard. "How did you get here?"

"If I'm here, then where else can I be?" Jiang Chong Wei smiled. His smile was melancholy and painful. "I'm nothing more than a blind man now, the Royal Palace would never use a blind man as warden, even if they didn't force me to leave, I would have left myself anyways!"

As Lu Xiao Feng watched his face, his heart was filled with sadness as well. Jiang Chong Wei was a very talented man with a great future ahead of him. But a blind man....

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly turned his head back towards Si Kong Zhai Xing.

"Do you recognize him?" He stared at Si Kong Zhai Xing. Si Kong Zhai Xing nodded.

"Do you know how he became like this?" Si Kong Zhai Xing sighed. He did not feel all too well inside either.

"Since you know, you should tell me who that person is now."

"Who?"

"The person who was sewed the thing, the same person who sent you

to steal it from me!"

"You think they are one and the same?"

"Correct!"

"Maybe that satin was that person's to begin with, why would that person want me to steal it back?"

"Maybe there was some secret on it and the person was afraid of me finding them."

"Haven't you already looked it over a lot of times?"

"Not enough!"

Si Kong Zhai Xing did not responde. He also looked very conflicted, very pained for trying to make this decision.

"So you did owe this person, but if this person did do these things. If you still have a shred of humanity in you, then you shouldn't keep protecting this person!"

"Must you make me say it?"

"You have to tell me!"

"Alright, I'll tell you." Si Kong Zhai Xing suddenly sighed. "That person is her!"

He suddenly pointed in front of him. Lu Xiao Feng instinctively turned to the direction of that he pointed and saw a person slowly walking out from inside the convent, head bowed. It was a Taoist nun with a purple robe, white stockings, and a purple hairpin made out of jade in her ebony black hair. Her complexion was pale as well. Within those pure water-like bright eyes of hers was filled with worry and sadness which gave her an even more indescribable, plain but not of this world beauty that was like a purple rays that now resided at the edge of the sky. With her head bowed, she slowly approached with a bowl of steaming hot medicine in her hands.

As soon as Lu Xiao Feng saw her, he knew that Si Kong Zhai Xing was lying again. That person could never be her. He turned around with the intention of inquiring further, the Si Kong Zhai Xing had disappeared. In that instant that Lu Xiao Feng saw this purple robed nun, this old fox had shot out through the door like a meteor. In that instant, Lu Xiao Feng seemed to be a little bit mesmerized. In truth, anybody would hard pressed not to be mesmerized when seeing this kind of otherworldly beauty. But even if he tried to chase after him now, it would be futile. Si Kong Zhai Xing might not be the fastest man in the world, but he was not that far off. Lu Xiao Feng sighed and swore that he would one day catch this old fox and force him to swallow 680 worms, worms that he dug out himself.

The setting sun's color faded, the breeze seemed colder. The cool breeze made the white poplar leaves rustle as it made its way through them. The purple robed nun slowly approached, still not picking her head up.

"Qing Xia, is that you?" Jiang Chong Wei suddenly asked.

"It's me, it's time for your medicine." Her voice was tender like the evening breeze.

"Lu Xiao Feng, are you still here?" Jiang Chong Wei asked.

"I'm here."

"This is my younger sister, Qing Xia, she is also the hostess here. Now you should finally understand why I would be here!"

"Jin Jiu Ling and Hua Man Lou are looking for you!" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly informed him.

"I know!"

"Do they know you are here?"

"They have already came here!"

"What did Hua Man Lou say to you?"

A very strange expression suddenly appeared on Jiang Chong Wei's face.

"He told me to not forget that he is blind as well; and furthermore,

never forget that he's had a great life!" He slowly said.

"Of course you didn't forget!"

"And that's why I'm still alive!" A man like him, to be suddenly blinded was not an easy thing to have the courage to live with.

"He is truly a remarkable man!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed in admiration.

"He is not like anybody else," Jiang Chong Wei nodded and sighed as well. "He's unique. He's always looking for ways to let others live on!"

"I should have known that his reason for finding you was to tell you those things!"

"He asked me some other questions as well!"

"What questions?"

"About what happened that day in the Royal Treasure Vault!"

"I wanted to ask you that too. Other than what you told Jin Jiu Ling, have you noticed anything else suspicious?"

"No!" Jiang Chong Wei's face twitch as if out of horror once again.

"Even if I did, I would not tell you!" He slowly declared.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want you to find this person!"

"Why not?" Lu Xiao Feng was quite confused.

"Because I have never seen anyone with such terrifying martial arts, even if you find this person, you would not be able to match up!"

His body was shaking now as well, as if he was thinking about that terrifying person again, and that even more terrifying needle. Blood was dripping off of the needle; fresh, red, blood....

Lu Xiao Feng wanted to ask some more but Jiang Qing Xia suddenly and coldly interrupted him.

"You have already asked too much, his wounds are not completely healed yet. I don't want him thinking back to what happened that day."

"It's ok, I'll be completely healed very soon!" Jiang Chong Wei managed a forced laugh.

"You'll completely heal very soon, I'm sure of it!" Lu Xiao Feng managed to force a little laugh as well. "I know you have always been one tough nut!"

"Well, since you are here, then why don't you stay a couple of days?"

Jiang Chong Wei's laugh was a bit more joyous and genuine now. "Maybe I'll be able to think of something in that time for you!"

"How could he stay here?" Jiang Qing Xia frowned. "There has never been any man here!"

"Aren't I a man?" Jiang Chong Wei laughed.

"But you...."

"If I can stay here, then he could too!" Jiang Chong Wei's expression darkened.

"But I..." Lu Xiao Feng tried to cut in.

"No matter what, you are staying here," Jiang Chong Wei cut him off too. "Hua Man Lou and Jin Jiu Ling might return in those couple of days, you never know. They are looking for you as well!"

"But after you are going to bed after you take your medicine!" Jiang Qing Xia said.

"I'll go to bed. Why don't you be a good host and lead him back and give him something to eat? You can't let a guest go hungry!"

"Would this Alms Giver please follow me?" Expressionless, Jiang Qing Xia turned around and coldly instructed Lu Xiao Feng.

She did not even seem to look Lu Xiao Feng in his eyes. She was truly a cold woman, colder even than ice.

Chapter 4 - A Pair of Red Shoes

Dusk colors were darker, the laterns in the meditation room was not yet lit. The last burst of brilliance from the setting sun fell upon the walk way leading up to the guest room behind the meditation room. It fell upon those old and decaying wooden columns, making them shine like they did in the days long past. In the gentle July night breeze, there came with it a gentle fragrance from the far away mountains and trees that just fills one's heart with joy and comfort. Jiang Qing Xia was walking very slowly, Lu Xiao Feng was also walking very slowly. Jiang Qing Xia did not say a word, Lu Xiao Feng did not open his mouth either. He seemed to have realized that he was an unwelcomed guest. Unwelcomed guests should all be at least wise enough to keep their mouths shut. The yard next to them was deserted, not a person could be seen nor heard. This entire place was a lonely place to began with, lonely people are used to the quiet.

"Alm-giver, please enter!" Jiang Qing Xia pushed open a door and turned to Lu Xiao Feng with a serious face.

"Many thanks!" Lu Xiao Feng replied with a serious face. The lamps in the room was not lit either, even the light from the setting sun could not penetrate its walls. Lu Xiao Feng slowly walked into the room, as if he was somehow scared to enter the room. Could he possibly have been afraid that this ice cold woman would lock him insde of this ice cold room?

"The devil isn't in the room, what are you scared of?" Jiang Qing Xia coldly said.

"The devil isn't in the room alright," Lu Xiao Feng meekly smiled, "but he is in the mind!"

"Who's mind?"

"Yours!"

"You are the devil yourself!" Jiang Qing Xia bit her lip. Instantly, this ice cold taoist nun had changed, changed almost to an entirely different person. She forcefully pushed Lu Xiao Feng inside, pushed him down onto a chair, placed both her hands on his shoulder to keep him down, and bit his ear.

"Now that's more like a female tiger," Lu Xiao Feng actually laughed. "Just then, you were acting like...."

"What was I acting like?" Jiang Qing Xia glared at him.

"Like a dead tigeress!" Jiang Qing Xia did not even wait until Lu Xiao Feng had finished before giving his ear another bite.

Lu Xiao Feng almost yelped from the pain.

"Are you all trained by the same master or something? What's with ear biting?" He managed to force out a smile.

"'You all'? Who are 'you all'?" Jiang Qing Xia glared at him again. Lu Xiao Feng did not reply, suddenly realizing that he had made a mistake

again.

"Do you often get your ear bitten?" Jiang Qing Xia would not let it go.

"It's not like I'm surrounded by dogs or anything, why would my ear get bitten?"

But Jiang Qing Xia's eyes got even bigger as her glare became even angrier.

"So are you calling me a dog? Is that what you are saying?" Lu Xiao Feng found himself in a corner again and was at a loss as to what to say.

"Tell me the truth, how many people have bit your ear?" Jiang Qing Xia angrily demanded, still viciously glaring at Lu Xiao Feng.

"Just... just you.!"

"Is that the truth?"

"Who else would have the guts to bite me?"

"What about Xue Bing? Does she have enough guts?"

"She's too scared to even touch me, she's lucky I don't bite her!"

"Sure you talk a good one now, but when you face her in person, I bet

you are too scared to say anything!" Jiang Qing Xia pouted.

"Why would I be scared?" Lu Xiao Feng laughed. "Am I suppose to be scared of her?"

Jiang Qing Xia suddenly laughed as well, laughing somewhat like how a cunning little fox would.

"Alright, go ahead! I'm here, let's see what you got!" At this moment, someone outside of the door coldly declared.

Lu Xiao Feng's heart sank. He did not even need to look to know that it was Xue Bing. Running into one female tiger was already bad enough.

The only thing worse than running into one female tiger is running into two tigeresses at the same time. Lu Xiao Feng's head suddenly felt three times bigger. Jiang Qing Xia giggled as she lit the lamp. The light shone upon Xue Bing's face. Her face was red again, red as a pepper, but this time it was from anger.

"Grabbing the initiative." Of course Lu Xiao Feng knew full well why this was important.

"I just happen to be looking for you! Didn't figure you would actually dare to come looking for me!" He suddenly jumped up and coldly told Xue Bing, all the while giving her the meanest glare he could muster.

"Why... why wouldn't I come dare come looking for you?" Seeing him so angry, Xue Bing went soft.

"What are you doing here?"

"We have always been old friends," Jiang Qing Xia cut in and answered for Xue Bing. "And we are also taught by the same master, specializing in ear biting, why wouldn't she be here?"

"I'm asking you, what are you doing here?" Lu Xiao Feng held his glare at Xue Bing, completely ignoring Jiang Qing Xia.

"You know full well that I'm here to deliver something!" Amazingly, she casually admitted to all of this, there was not even the slightest hesitation on her face. "Of course, it was that piece of red satin!"

"You are not denying it?" It was Lu Xiao Feng's turn to be a little taken aback.

"It's not like something shameful, why would I deny it?"

"You helped someone else trick me!" Lu Xiao Feng almost shouted. "Is that suppose to be something to be proud of?"

"Si Kong Zhai Xing isn't just someone else, he's your friend, you said that yourself!" Even Lu Xiao Feng had to concede that point. Xue Bing let out a little laugh and continued rather smugly. "I helped your friend, you should be grateful!"

"You helped him sell me out, and yet I should be grateful?" Lu Xiao

Feng was taken aback again.

"That piece of satin was of no use to you anymore but was very useful for him. All I did was help him take it here, how is that selling you out?" She seemed angrier than Lu Xiao Feng and ten times more righteous than Lu Xiao Feng. "Besides, isn't he your friend? Did you not lie to him as well? And afterwards you were all proud and pleased with yourself. So why can't I lie to you?"

"But you... you... you should be helping me!"

"Well whose fault is it that you were so full of yourself? As if there was nobody in the world that's better than you. Well I can't stand that attitude of yours!" Xue Bing smirked.

Lu Xiao Feng had no reply. He suddenly discovered that when a man ran into a woman, it was like a scholar running into a group of soldiers: reasoning is just futile. Inside of a woman's heart seemed completely devoid of the words "right" and "wrong". Everything she does would inevitably be based on her whim and if you ever tried to argue reasons with her, she would always have 10 times as many reasons as you do.

"I haven't even dealt with you talking about me behind my back and you try to pin this on me?" The smirk disappeared from Xue Bing's face.

"This is called capturing the initiative, all the men in the world does it!" Jiang Qing Xia snickered.

"And what do you have to say for yourself now?" Xue Bing teased.

"I only have one thing to say." Lu Xiao Feng meekly smiled.

"Well? Spit it out!" Xue Bing commanded.

"Who did you give the red satin to?"

"Lu Dong Bin!"

"Who the hell is Lu Dong Bin?" Lu Xiao Feng was taken aback once again.

"You don't even know who Lu Dong Bin is? How did you ever live to be 30?" Xue Bing wondered out loud.

"Lu Dong Bin is Lu Chun Yang, the very same Chun Yang Taoist master who sang and flew his way over the Lake Dong Ting. Don't you know?" Jiang Qing Xia explained matter of factly.

{Note: Lu Dong Bin is one of the most famous legendary Taoists in Chinese folk lore. The tales of his deeds are wide and varied. He is to some Taoists what Buddha is to some Buddhists.}

"I thought that Lu Dong Bin wanted white peonys, since when did he want black peonys embroidered on red satin?" Lu Xiao Feng smiled weakly.

"Si Kong Zhai Xing did not tell me to give the satin to any person," Xue

Bing finally explained. "He only wanted me to place it in front of Lu Dong Bin's altar."

"And where is the altar?"

"In that little temple out back."

"How long have you been here?"

"Not too long, but long enough to hear you talking badly about me!"
Xue Bing coldly answered.

In the bamboo woods behind the convent there was a homely little temple. Inside the temple was lit up by an ever-lit lamp, whose light fell upon Chun Yang Taoist Master's ever smiling face. Even though he might not be able to enjoy the meat and incense offered up in the altar in the front of the convent, but he was still very satisfied. Lu Dong Bin was a smart deity, smart deities are like smart people, they all understand how to be satisfied and happy. Lu Xiao Feng did not wait for Xue Bing to finish before rushing out here to find that there really was a piece of red satin with a black peony sewn on it at the foot of the altar. By the time he picked up the satin, Jiang Qing Xia and Xue Bing had both arrived as well.

"It's still here!" Lu Xiao Feng mumbled to himself as he flipped the satin over in his hand in deep thought.

"Si Kong Zhai Xing must not have thought that Xue Bing would tell you the truth so soon and so have not gotten around to picking it up." Jiang Qing Xia proposed.

"Maybe he wasn't suppose to pick it up!" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly looked up and said, looking straight into her eyes.

"Well then who was suppose to if not him?" Jiang Qing Xia asked.

"You!"

"Are you crazy?" Jiang Qing Xia laughed. "What would I need this God forsaken piece of satin for?"

"I'm about to ask you that myself!"

"Do you actually think that I'm the one who told him to steal this from you?" Jiang Qing Xia's expression changed.

Incredibly, Lu Xiao Feng silently conceded the point.

"Well if I did ask him to steal it, then why would he lead you here?"

"Maybe he had to finish the deal in person but could not shake me off of his tail; or maybe he suddenly found his conscious and felt that he had wronged me; or maybe he led me here on purpose so that I would not suspect you!"

"So what you are telling me is that you think that I am that Embroidery Bandit?" Jiang Qing Xia's face was red with rage.

Lu Xiao Feng did not deny this.

"Maybe you are not that stupid," Jiang Qing Xia suddenly laughed again. "But you forgot one thing!"

"Oh?"

"You forgot that Jiang Chong Wei is my elder brother! Why would I blind my brother?" As soon as she finished, she turned around to leave, as if she was done trying to reason with this kind of an idiot.

"Wait!" But Lu Xiao Feng blocked her way.

"What are you going to say now?" Jiang Qing Xia sneered.

"Only one thing!"

"Ok, I'll listen to you say one more thing!"

"Jiang Chong Wei don't have any sisters, and you don't have any brothers. Your surname was not originally Jiang!"

All of the colors disappeared from Jiang Qing Xia's face as her face turned deathly pale.

"How... how... how did you know that?"

"I didn't want to know either." Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "But I can't help it if fate just want me to find out some things that I should not know!"

"What else do you know?" Jiang Qing Xia viciously stared at him with her piercing eyes.

"Do you really want me to say it?"

"Say it!"

"You are Jiang Chong Wei's unwedded wife, but for some reason you became a nun instead. You pretended not to know me in front of him because you didn't want to disturb him, didn't want him to know...."

"Shut up!" Jiang Qing Xia suddenly yelled. Her whole body was shaking.

"I didn't want to say those things either!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"That's right, Jiang Chong Wei and I were arranged to marry each other when we were little." Jiang Qing Xia's body was still shaking uncontrollably, but she still replied through her tightly clenched teeth. "But when we grew up and met each other, we discovered that there was no way that we could be together so...."

"So you became a nun?" Lu Xiao Feng finished for her.

Jiang Qing Xia nodded.

"Other than becoming a nun, what else could I do?" Tears fell from her eyes.

A girl like her, becoming a nun at such an age must have been coupled with a tragic and painful story.

"You shouldn't have forced her to say those things!" Xue Bing bit her lips and reprimanded Lu Xiao Feng, those eyes that glared at Lu Xiao Feng were filled with tears as well.

"It's ok, I want to say it!" Jiang Qing Xia suddenly shouted. She gently wiped her tears away with her sleeve and held her head high. "Even though I was a nun, I was still young and can't stand this type of quiet and loneliness. So I wanted to go out and have an adventure or two in the world out there. So I came to know quite a number of men, and came to know you!"

Lu Xiao Feng quietly sighed -- even when a woman becomes a nun, it does not mean that she is dead, she still had the right to her own life and had the right to live how she sees fit.

"If you think that I did not want Jiang Chong Wei to know, then you are wrong. And if you think that I blinded him because I did not want to marry him, then you are even more wrong, he..."

She suddenly stopped as she stared out of the window in shock.

Jiang Chong Wei had already walked in from the darkness outside, walking in with his hands feeling and leading the way. His face was also deathly pale.

"It wasn't because she did not want to marry me, it was because I can't take her as my wife!" He quietly revealed.

"Why?" Xue Bing had to ask.

"Because I..."

"You don't have to tell them," Jiang Qing Xia shouted desperately once again. "You don't have to tell anyone!"

Jiang Chong Wei smiled, it was a sad and lonely smile.

"It's ok, I want to say it too." His face was covered with pain. "I can't take her as my wife, because I have long ago turned into a disabled person, I can't be someone's husband, and can never be anyone's father!"

Xue Bing finally understood, but now she regretted asking. Why did she have to know? Aren't other people's suffering painful for oneself as well?

"All of the things that Qing Xia did, I knew about all of them." Jiang Chong Wei continued. "No matter what she did, I don't blame her one bit. Besides, I know that even though she don't look it on the outside, she's not a loose woman at all!"

Jiang Qing Xia's head bowed down as tears rolled down her cheeks. For a young and vibrant woman like her, fighting off the feelings and emotions of youths was almost impossible, no matter what she did, it was all forgiveable by anyone's standards. But she could not forgive herself one bit.

"No matter what you say, I can guarantee that she is absolutely not the person who blinded me!" Jiang Chong Wei concluded.

"Are you sure? Did you get enough of a good look at the person to know it's not her?" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly asked. His heart was filled with empathy as well, but this matter was just too important, so he had little choice but to swallow his feelings and make sure.

"Of course I got a good look!" Jiang Chong Wei immediately answered without the slightest hesitation.

"What did you see that made you so sure it was not her?"

"I... I just know, don't forget that when we first met, she was still just a kid!"

"But you two had not seen each other for many years, right?"

"What are you trying to say?" Jiang Chong Wei's face dropped as he coldly demanded. "Are you insinuating that I'm lying for her?"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed. He had truly run out of ways to probe further.

"As long as we have no regrets and no doubts in our hearts, it doesn't matter what he thinks!" Jiang Qing Xia coldly declared.

Jiang Chong Wei nodded. Jiang Qing Xia had already walked up to his side and put his arm over her shoulders to support him.

"Let's go!" He said.

All Lu Xiao Feng could do was bow his head and let them walk by. The light from the lamp was faint, the floor was made from green stone slabs. Jiang Qing Xia was wearing a pair of green colored shoes which did not match with her purple robe at all. She had always been a very picky woman.

"Wait!" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly said again.

"Are you not finished yet?" Jiang Qing Xia was intent on ignoring him, but suddenly noticed that he was staring at her feet, so she sneered.

"I'm only finding it a bit strange!"

"What's so strange?"

Lu Xiao Feng's eyes still had not left her feet.

"Why is there a red edge inside of your green colored shoes?" He slowly asked.

Jiang Qing Xia's expression changed again as she instinctively tried to hide her feet below her robe.

"Your Taoist robe isn't long enough to hid your feet," Lu Xiao Feng matter of factly told her. "Inside of those green shoes, you shouldn't have worn those red shoes!"

Red shoes! Jiang Chong Wei's expression seemed to change was well.

"What eyes you have!" Jiang Qing Xia suddenly coldly laughed. Before the sound of her laughter went away, she had already struck. She actually tried to used two of those beautiful and orchid like fingers of hers to dig out Lu Xiao Feng's eyes! Her moves were quick and accurate!

"You should only try to bite ears, you should not try to dig my eyes out!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed. As he said those 16 words, Jiang Qing Xia had already attacked 11 times. Such quick moves! Such swift attacks! Jiang Qing Xia was one of the famouse four scariest women in all of the martial world. They were all incredible beauties, but they were all female tigers. Countless men had already been injured under their claws.

When women attack, most of the time their moves would be faster and more vicious than men's attacks. Because they know that their strength could not match the men's, so they did not want to be boggled down in a prolonged fight with men! So most of the time, their moves were all aimed to take the man's life! But Lu Xiao Feng was not like any other men, incredibly, he was actually even faster than Jiang Qing Xia. He easily

dodged Jiang Qing Xia's 11 strikes without even fighting back. It looked as if he did not want to fight back, but if he had fought back, Jiang Qing Xia probably would not have been able to get out of the way.

"Projectiles!" Jiang Qing Xia clenched her teeth and yelled. Lu Xiao Feng immediately backed up two meters or so, but Jiang Qing Xia did not let loose any projectiles. Instead her body flipped in midair and shot toward the outside. At this moment, Lu Xiao Feng suddenly reached out and, with lightning like quickness, grabbed her shoes. And only grabbed her shoes, not her. Inside those plain green colored cloth shoes, there was really a pair of red shoes - embroidered red satin shoes. But she was already enveloped by the darkness and disappeared instantly.

Lu Xiao Feng did not chase after her. Xue Bing, of course, did not either, she was still shocked.

Jiang Chong Wei stood there motionlessly, his complexion a deathly gray.

"Is she gone?" He suddenly asked.

"She's gone!" Lu Xiao Feng answered.

Jiang Chong Wei's fists were clench tightly and the corner of his eyes twitched uncontrollably, making those dark and cave like eyes of his look even more indescribably terrifying.

"Did that Embroidery Bandit wore red shoes too?" Lu Xiao Feng asked.

Jiang Chong Wei's expression became even more tortured. Finally, slowly, he nodded.

"Why didn't you say something earlier?"

"I didn't really remember either, only when you just said something did I recall it!" Only at that instant when the flash of the needle point arrived in front of his eyes did he see that pair of red shoes. Red like blood.

"What kind of eyes do you have?" Xue Bing finally let out a sigh. "I couldn't spot the red lining around her shoes at all."

"Neither could I!"

Xue Bing was startled.

"I only thought that the color of her shoes did not match her clothing at all, and it seemed a little too big too, as if it was something that was temporarily and hastily put on!"

"So you tested her?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"To be around a person like you is truly quite dangerous!" Xue Bing sighed again, despite of herself.

"Sun Zhong would probably disagree adamantly," Lu Xiao Feng smiled. "He's probably certain that you are more dangerous than me!"

"I should have chopped his two legs off too!" Xue Bing joked.

"Did he come and trouble you again?" Lu Xiao Feng wondered.

"He wouldn't dare!"

"But then how did his severed hand end up on that plate on your table?"

"What hand?" Xue Bing was startled at that question as well.

"You didn't see that hand?"

"No!"

"No way that hand crawled onto the plate by itself could it?" Lu Xiao Feng meekly smiled. He could not figure that out for the life of him!

"There's another thing that I can't figure out," said Xue Bing. "Si Kong Zhai Xing wanted me to take this here, then why did he bring you here as well?"

"Nobody can figure out why a person like him do what he does," sighed Lu Xiao Feng. "So it's best to not even think about it."

"I can't understand something either, why would Qing Xia do something like this?" Jiang Chong Wei gloomily asked.

"You can stop thinking about it too!" Lu Xiao Feng answered.

"Why?"

"Because she didn't do it." Lu Xiao Feng smiled again.

"She didn't?" Jiang Chong Wei was surprised at the revelation. "She's not the Embroidery Bandit?"

"No way. Her kungfu is not bad, but is still quite a long way before she could even hope to blind masters like Chang Man Tian and Hua Yi Fan in one move!"

"You can tell that she wasn't purposefully holding back?"

"I can!"

"And that's why you let her go!" Jiang Chong Wei sighed deeply.

Lu Xiao Feng did not deny this. If he could grab a person's shoes, then he could grab that person's feet. Once a person's feet have been captured, then there was no way that person could go anywhere.

"If she had nothing to do with this, then why did she run" Jiang Chong Wei frowned after some deep thought.

"Because she has another secret that she does not want others to know about!" Lu Xiao Feng concluded.

"What secret?"

"The secret of the red shoes!"

"The Embroidery Bandit was wearing red shoes too," Jiang Chong Wei nodded. "Could they be in the same organization?"

"Maybe, maybe not." Lu Xiao Feng replied, knowing full well that what he just said was completely useless, but he still had to say it. "That Embroidery Bandit is an incredibly skilled and powerful, beard wearing, but red shoes wearing woman."

That was the only thing they know, but they could not be sure of this, and was even further from proving it.

"She was such a simple, innocent, and kind girl," Jiang Chong Wei's expression became even more melancholy. "She could have been a perfect spouse for a man, could she have really changed?"

"How long has it been since you seen her?" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly asked.

"Not long, she would come to see me my birthday every year!"

"When is your birthday?"

"The 14th of May!"

"On what day did the heist take place?"

"The 11th of June."

Lu Xiao Feng did not say another word. Jiang Chong Wei seemed to want to say something, but for some reason he held it back and instead just let out a long and exhausted sigh. Head bowed, he turned and felt his way out.

Watching his lonesome shadow disappear in the darkness, Xue Bing could not help herself and sighed as well.

"He must feel terrible inside right now!"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"Jiang Qing Xia visited him on May 14th, and not even a month later, the heist took place!"

"It could just be nothing more than a coincidence!"

"But the security of the Royal Treasury Vault is so tight that even a fly couldn't get in, how could the Embroidery Bandit have gotten in?"

"Any ideas?"

"I think, maybe somebody had already went into the Royal Palace and check out the lay out of the place for her as well as made an imprint of the key to the Vault with wax." Xue Bing's eyes lit up as she explained her hypothesis.

"And you are saying that person is none other than Jiang Qing Xia!"

Xue Bing did not deny this claim and sighed. "Only she could get close to Jiang Chong Wei, and only Jiang Chong Wei had the key to that Vault!"

"You are saying that she secretly made a imprint of the key, made a copy from the imprint and gave it to that Embroidery Bandit?"

"Correct!"

"And that the Embroidery Bandit got in the Vault by using that key to open the Vault doors."

"I think that has to be what happened!"

"Your scenario isn't too far fetched, but you forgot two things!"

"What?"

"The Vault doors are guarded all day and night by guards, how could someone with a huge beard just open the Vault doors and walk in without the guard noticing? He had to have been invisible." Xue Bing had no explanation for this.

"Not only that, when Jiang Chong Wei went into the Vault that day, the door was still locked from the outside. How could the Embroidery Bandit lock the door from the outside after he had entered the Vault?"

"Well, if my idea is so wrong, then how do you think she did it?" Xue Bing was blushing again.

"She must have used a very unique method, it might not even have anything to do with Jiang Qing Xia!"

"Pity even you can't figure exactly what is that very unique method of hers." Xue Bing coldly replied.

"That's why I have to give it a try!"

"Give what a try?"

"Try to see if I can find a way to get in!"

Xue Bing's eyes were wide in amazement as she looked at him in shock.

"Are you drunk again?"

"I haven't drank one drop of wine today!"

"Well if you are not drunk, then you must be insane! A normal and sober person would never even think of doing such a thing!"

"Oh?"

"Do you know how many guards there are inside the RoyalPalace?"

"Over 800!"

"And you know that every guard carries with him a very powerful Zhu Ge Bow? That as soon as anyone has been caught, they would instantly be turned into a hedgehog?"

"I know!"

"And you know how many other kungfu masters are in the RoyalPalace besides those guards?"

"Like the number of stars in the sky!"

"And you know that the Young Prince's personal sword skills were taught to him by none other than the Master of White Cloud Castle?"

"Rumors say that he's actually the best fighter in the RoyalPalace!"

"And you know that the restricted areas of the RoyalPalace all carry with them a certain death for anybody caught within them, no questions asked?"

"I know!"

"But you are still going to try to break in?"

"Yes!"

"Do you want to die?"

"No!"

"What makes you think that you could try to break in and make it out alive?"

"Nothing!"

"Then why are you willing to take this risk?" Xue Bing bit her lip. "Just to prove Jiang Qing Xia's innocence?"

"I only want to find out whether or not she really had anything to do with this whole thing."

"Do you really care that much about her?"

"Because I like her!"

Xue Bing suddenly jumped up and viciously glared at him.

"Alright, go ahead and die!" She loudly declared.

The wind was gentler, the lonely yard was even more lonesome. Lu Xiao Feng came walking out, and Xue Bing followed him.

"Are we heading to the Southeast now?"

"We? Again?" Lu Xiao Feng looked like someone had just stuffed his mouth full of sour tangerines.

"Of course us!" said Xue Bing with a straight face. "Did you think you could just leave me here by myself?"

Lu Xiao Feng really did, but even he knew that once this kind of women made up her mind to follow you, you cannot get rid of her no matter what you tried.

"What are you going with me for? Planning to keep me company when I die?"

"No!" Xue Bing was biting her lip again. "I just want to see what you

look like after you died!"

The streets were mostly paved with green stone slabs, red cotton trees that were redder than maple leaves lined the streets, the colors were bright and splendid like the dusk.

"This is WangPingCity?"

"Mmhmm!"

"I heard that the food here is the best!"

"Have you had some?"

"No, but I have heard a couple of things that are the best!"

"Well tell me."

"Big Wings of Three Big Rings, Wen Yuan's Hundred Colored Chicken, Xi Yuan's Lake Vegetables, Nan Yuan's Scorched Snail Shells...."

Xue Bing only listed these things before she had to stop, because she discovered that she was almost drooling.

"They are not that big of a deal, the best eats here you probably have

never even heard of before!" Lu Xiao Feng nonchalantly told her.

"Are you going to take me to eat it now?" Xue Bing's eyes lit up.

"As long as you behave like a good girl, I guarantee that you'll have something good to eat!"

He had obviously been here before as he put on the look of an old horse that knew his way around. With Xue Bing following behind him, he twisted and turned through the street and made his way into a very narrow alley. The alley was very poorly lit, and its ground still had spots of mud from the rain a couple of days ago. There were all types of little vendors on both sides, but all of their doors were very narrow as well. The people making their way in and out of the doors all looked like the seedy types.

"There are good eats at a place like this?" Xue Bing was mumbling to herself under her breath. But she did not dare to ask out loud. This place was like a foreign country to her, she did not understand a single word that the locals were saying. She was really a little afraid that Lu Xiao Feng might just leave her here all by herself.

It was at this moment that she realized that there was an indescribably delicious smell that had floated over with the breeze. She had never smelled anything so sweet. Looks like Lu Xiao Feng did not lie to her at all, there really was something good to eat here.

"What is this smell?" She had to ask.

"The smell of the most delicious thing in the world, you'll agree after you had some too!" Lu Xiao Feng matter of factly told her.

At the very back of the alley was a very small little shop, by its front door was a huge stove. On the stove there stewed a huge pot of food, the smell had originated from this stove. But the inside of the shop was very dirty. The walls, chairs, tables, were all an oily blacked from the fumes, even the sign above the door was darkened so much that it was impossible to make out any words. But this smell was truly too alluring. They had just sat down when a waiter scooped up two big bowls of some kind of grinded meat for them.

It seemed like this place served nothing else. The meat was still steaming, not only did it smell delicious, it looked good too.

Lu Xiao Feng immediately picked up a spoon and handed it to Xue Bing.

"Eat it while it's hot, it's not nearly as good if it gets cold!"

Xue Bing tried a scoup, then helped herself to another. It tasted amazing.

"What's in here anyways?" She had to ask. "Other than meat, there seemed to be alot of other stuff!"

"Do you like it?"

"It's delicious!"

"If it's delicious, then eat more and talk less!"

Lu Xiao Feng finished one bowl and added another. Suddenly, he made a strange gesture toward that waiter. That waiter had carried himself as if he could not care less about this type of out of towners.

But as soon as he saw Lu Xiao Feng's gesture, his entire demeanor immediately changed.

"Wha'cha wang?" He came running over with a wide smile.

"Ima 'ere 'oo'in fo some'un!" Lu Xiao Feng replied.

"Who aria 'oo'in fo?"

"The Snake King."

The waiter's expression changed a little.

"Wha'cha wang 'im fo?"

"Ma surname's Lu, ja tell 'im dat, 'e'll know!"

The waiter hesitated a little before finally nodding a bit.

“‘ait ‘ere!”

Xue Bing was in shock this entire time. Finally, after the waiter had exited through another narrow door in the back did she could not restrain herself anymore and asked.

“What were you two talking about just then?”

“I asked him to help me find someone!”

“Someone in this kind place? Who?”

“The Snake King!”

“The Snake King? And who might the Snake King be?”

“On the street leading to here, what did you see?” Lu Xiao Feng did not answer but asked her a question instead.

“It’s not a street, it’s just a small and dirty alleyway.”

“This is a street, and it could very well be the most famous street in this city!”

“Oh?”

“Do you know what this street has?”

"Some terribly unkempt and downtrodden vendors, and a host of terribly seedy individuals!"

"Can't you tell what those individuals do?"

"I don't even want to look at them, much less think about them!"

"Well you should!"

"Why?"

"Because within them, there's at least 10 fugitives with prices on their heads, at least 20 of the quickest thieves, at least 30 or so fighters for highers. If you get on their bad side, it's almost impossible to accomplish anything in this city!"

"I get it now, this is a gang street!"

"The Snake King is the king of this street, he's also the leader of all of them. Just one word from him and all of them would be perfectly willing to do anything you ask of them!"

"You are not planning on asking these people to fight for you are you?"

"If I need help for a fight, I already have as an excellent helper as you, why would I need anyone else?" Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"Then what are you asking the Snake King for?"

"I want to ask him to help me...."

He had not finished when the waiter hurried came running back in. His demeanor towards Lu Xiao Feng changed once again, to something warmer and more respectful.

"Sa ya ar'a 'ld fri'nds, Sa ya shalda'old ma'rlia!"

"'e 'till remamba ma?" Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"'orsa 'e does! Boss sa' yar ha'da bes'goongfu'n da wirl, and'a grit frind. 'e tol'ma ta br'n ya quigly!"

Behind that narrow door in the back was yet another, even smaller, alley. From the dark ditches there emanated a terrible stench, flies were buzzing all around. At the end of the alley, there was another small door.

Pushing open that door, they came upon a very large yard. About ten or so strong shirtless men were busy playing dice in the yard, so involved were they that they were all covered in sweat. At the corner was several scores of cages, some of the cages had poisonous snakes in them, others had in them wild cats and wild dogs. A person was just in the middle of grabbing a yellow dog out from a cage and, in one swift motion, pushed it down into a huge bath tub so that it was entirely submerged in the water and drowned the dog right then and there. Xue Bing almost puked when she saw that.

But Lu Xiao Feng seemed unwavered.

"Now that's a real expert at killing dogs," He casually observed. "That way not a single blood is lost. That kind of dog meat really taste good!"

Xue Bing did not reply, she was afraid that if she did then all that meat that she had just ate would be coming back up.

Two big men who were occupied with watching others playing dice suddenly came walking up.

"Yar 'ere fo Snake King?" They glared at Lu Xiao Feng.

Lu Xiao Feng nodded. The two men shot each other a look before suddenly attacking, trying to grab ahold of Lu Xiao Feng.

Lu Xiao Feng did not move, the two men had just touched him when they themselves was sent flying off.

The waiter cheered in joy.

"I sad 'at yar goongfu's grit, dem di'nt beliva ma an' lesee 'f 'newon els wan'a tra?"

All of the men in the yard had turned and looked at Lu Xiao Feng in awe as they slowly backed up to make a path of him.

The waiter led him into another little vendor place and up a very narrow staircase to a very narrow door. On the door hung a curtain made of black and prayer beads.

"Snake King's 'nsi' ples!"

How could the leader capable of controlling all of those city low lives live in such a downtrodden place? Xue Bing thought it was all very strange, until she walked through the door. Inside the door was like an entirely different world from the one outside. Even a spoilt girl like Xue Bing who had been brought up in the richest of rich families had never seen any room that was so immaculately and expensively decorated. Everything, every object in the room was a priceless masterpiece, from the tea cups made from the whole pieces of white jade to the fruit bowl made from crystals from Persia to even the paintings on the wall. Two of them she recognized were Wu Dao Zi's portraits, another was a horse drawn by Han Gan, and another was incredibly the work of the Emperor himself.

A person was leaning back onto a padded rocking chair. Smiling, he extended his hands towards Lu Xiao Feng. There was hardly any meat on those hands at all. Xue Bing had never seen anybody so thin in her entire life. Not only was there no meat on his hand, his pale face seemed nothing more than a piece of skin hanging off of bare bones.

Despite it being a scorching day outside, the chair had on it a layer of tiger fur, and on top of that, he was wearing a huge coat. Xue Bing could not have dreamed that the leader of all those city dwellers would be like this. Lu Xiao Feng had already walked over and tightly took his hand into his own.

"I didn't think that you would actually remember a disabled person like me and would actually come to visit me!" The Snake King smiled.

Xue Bing sighed in relief, finally someone speaking words that she could actually understand.

"I had wanted to visit you for a long time, but this... this time I'm not here just to see you!" Lu Xiao Feng replied.

"It doesn't matter, what matters is that you are here, and I'm already overjoyed about that!"

"I have something to ask of you!"

"You came here, of course it's to ask me for something, the fact that you can think of coming to me is proof to me that you still think of me as a friend, that's more than enough!" He laughed heartily and turned toward Xue Bing. "Besides, you brought such a beautiful lady with you, it's been forever since I have seen anything nearly as beautiful!"

Xue Bing blushed.

"My surname is Xue, full name Xue Bing!" She shyly replied. She suddenly discovered that even though the Snake King was physically weak, he was still a very bold and straightforward person, and a great loyal friend as well. He suddenly discovered that her impression of him was a very good one.

"Xue Bing? Are you the Xue Bing from Divine Needle Xue's family?"

Xue Bing blushinglly nodded.

"Who knew that I would get to see the most famous beauty in all of the martial world?" The Snake King laughed and declared loudly. Holding tightly onto Lu Xiao Feng's hands he said. "Looks like not only are your taste top notch, your luck is pretty good too. If I were you, I would buy myself a huge drink right about now."

This time Lu Xiao Feng seemed very obedient as he immediately poured himself a drink and drank it. There was a horn shaped golden cup on the table, and the wine was amber colored.

The wine was about gone when the Snake King finally spoke up again.

"What do you want? If I have it, you can take it. If I don't have it, I'll find it for you!"

"I want a map!"

"What map?"

"A map of the lay out of the RoyalPalace, with where the guards and the traps are located on them as well as their shift times!"

This was, of course, not an easy thing to accomplish. But the Snake King did not look troubled, nor did he bother to ask what a map like this was

used for.

His answer was very simple.

"Ok!"

Lu Xiao Feng did not thank him, their friendship was beyond that word.

The Snake King looked into his eyes with satisfaction in his own eyes. He understood how Lu Xiao Feng felt. He only asked one question.

"Where are you planning to stay tonight?"

"As You Wish Inn!"

"Before sunset tomorrow, I'll send someone with the map to you."

The breeze on the river shore is forever cool and refreshing. The night was cool like the water. There was the moon, there were the stars, and there were hundreds of star like fires on the fish boats. With joy in their hearts, they slowly strode on the shore of the river. This was truly a beautiful city, they liked this city, and also liked the people of this city.

"I finally understood something!" Xue Bing suddenly gently sighed.

"What's that?" Lu Xiao Feng inquired.

"You really do have alot of great friends!"

"Especially a friend like the Snake King," Lu Xiao Feng concurred.
"Anybody who could have a friend like him is lucky!"

Xue Bing stopped and watched the light on the fishing bloats flicker on the river and the moonlit waves. Her heart was filled with joy and happiness.

"I like this place, in the future I might settle down here!"

"Not only are the people here great, the weather is great, and there's alot of good stuff to eat here!"

"Especially that grinded meat that you took me to eat," Xue Bing shyly declared. "I'll never forget it!"

"If you knew what it was made of, then you would really never forget it!"
Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"What was it made of?"

"Snake and cat meat."

Xue Bing was still puking. She had already puked 5 times, when she made it back to the inn, she found a washing bowl and hid over in the corner of the room, puking. She was puking out the excess water in her stomach by this point. Lu Xiao Feng just smiled as he stood watching on the side.

Finally, Xue Bing finished puking and turned around. She gave him the meanest glare.

"There must be something wrong with you, you like seeing others suffer." She bitterly whined through her clenched teeth.

"I don't like seeing others suffer," Lu Xiao Feng was still smiling. "I just like seeing you suffer a little!"

"What did I ever do to you?" Xue Bing jumped up. "Why are you torturing me like this?"

"Don't this type of person have a heart?" Lu Xiao Feng shook his head and sighed. "I took her to eat such delicious food, and yet she's accusing me of torturing her!"

"So you are saying that I should be grateful to you?"

"Exactly!"

"I'm very grateful, so grateful in fact that I want to bite you to death!"

She suddenly reached over and grabbed him. She bit his ear. It was not a hard bite....

The breeze was so gentle, the night was so quiet. Two young and passionate people in a strange but beautiful city - if you are man, don't you wish you are Lu Xiao Feng? If you are a woman, don't you wish you are Xue Bing?

Dusk, dusk again. Hand in hand, they returned from the city. There was a huge envelope resting on the table.

There was only 4 words on the envelope.

"Fortunate to Not Disappoint!"

Underneath the star light, the street made of green stone slabs was glowing like a mirror.

"Must you go?" Xue Bing held onto Lu Xiao Feng's hand as tightly as possible. Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"And you won't allow me to go with you?" Lu Xiao Feng nodded again.

She turned away, because there were tear in her eyes, tears that she did not want him to see.

"If the two of us go, then the chances of us surviving is cut in half!" He explained.

"But... how do you expect to live waiting for you outside all by myself?"

"You could always go find someone to chat or drink!"

"Who do you expect me to go find?"

"Whoever, as long as they have tongues that talk and mouths that drink!" Lu Xiao Feng joked.

Xue Bing snapped her head back around and glared at him. She gave him a rather hard kick in the shin.

"Ok fine! I'll go and find some other man, you just go ahead and die!" She loudly proclaimed.

Chapter 5 - Risks of Clues

The wind was still that gentle, the night was still that serene. But Lu Xiao Feng knew full well that this quiet night could hide within it countless traps, that his gentle wind could at any moment carry with it fatal arrows.

"Inside the RoyalPalace, there are actually only 620 guards, at night they are split up into three shifts."

"There are 200 men per shift, and every shift is split up even more into 6 teams."

"Of these 6 teams, some patrol throughout the Palace, some permanently stands guard outside the Prince's quarters, and some are hide inside the yards and the halls waiting to ambush anyone."

"The one team that patrols outside of the Vault consists of 54 men in total. They are split up into groups of nine. Starting at 8pm, they start patrolling the area surrounding the Vault, at most 5 minutes of time window between the patrols."

The Snake King had already found out a great deal about these things. Obviously, he had contacts inside the RoyalPalace. To enter the RoyalPalace, there is only one way - through a small little yard in the Northwest corner. That was where the quarters for the guards was situated, and was also the least guarded place in all of the RoyalPalace. The guards that was not on shift were probably all exhausted and was in

deep sleep before they even land on their beds. Lu Xiao Feng had already scaled over the wall, but he still did not feel right inside. He had not wanted to say those things to Xue Bing, but he had to, he could never allow Xue Bing to take this risk with him.

Even though all he wanted to do was finding out whether or not a person could get into that Vault all by himself, even though all he wanted to do was to find out how the Embroidery Bandit got into the Vault so he would have a clue to follow. But he also knew full well that entering the RoyalPalace was like putting one foot into death's door. As soon as one was discovered, then one was doomed to die under a flurry for blades and arrows.

The guards inside RoyalPalace would never bother to listen to his explanations. He could never allow Xue Bing to take this risk.

But then why was he taking this risk? Even he himself was not too convinced that he knew the answer to that question. Maybe it was nothing more than the fact that he was a born risk taker. Maybe he was motivated not only by curiosity but competitiveness as well. No matter what, he had swore to himself that he would unmask that Embroidery Bandit.

Inside the yard was a row of rather plain looking buildings, once in a while snoring could be heard coming from inside of them. Behind them the light in the huge kitchen facility was still on, obviously someone was busy preparing some night meals for those guards about to return from their shift. Right now was precisely the time that the first shift of guards come off their shift and the second shift goes on. The third shift of guards were still deep in their dreams.

Lu Xiao Feng was not the King of Thieves, because he never steals. But stealing an uniform from a group of sleeping youths was far from difficult for someone like him.

So now that he had a full set of guard uniform, he put it on over his tight thief outfit. The guards were all big and strong young men, so all of them had similiar height and built to him. But he still must be quick. During the change of shift, some small bit of confusion and chaos was unavoidable, and because of the confusion some lapses in awareness was also unavoidable. This was his best chance. He had already found the quickest and most direct route to the Vault on the map.

On the way he ran into some guards that had just got off their shift, but he did not avoid them in anyway, and they did not pay him much attention either.

Someone showing up late during shift changes was not unusual. Besides, of the 800 or so guards inside the RoyalPalace, there were some relatively new recruits anyways. The Vault premise actually covers a large area of land. To the left was a wood of peach trees, but their blossoms had already withered away. Lu Xiao Feng hid in the wood until a group of patrols walked by before lightly and quietly jumping out and getting in line behind the last man.

His movements was, of course, made in absolute silence. And those other patrols that they walked by obviously would not notice that his group had an extra man at the back. This particular group's job was to patrol around the outside of the Vault itself, so he followed them around the entire Vault one time. His heart was growing cold. The walls of the Vault were constructed out of giantic boulders with nary an opening anywhere, nevermind windows. It looked as if not even a fly could get in.

After waiting for the man in front of him to turn the corner, Lu Xiao Feng suddenly flew up onto the roof of the Vault. Maybe there was an air hole up on the roof, even if the roof was covered in tiles, they would not be too hard to move out of the way. He knew that quite a number of people in the shadier side of the martial world liked to go this route. So now he made like a gecko and searched the roof thoroughly. He still could not find any way in.

He removed a couple of roof tiles only to discover that underneath was 3 layers of steel wires that looked impossible to cut even with the sharpest of blades. This Vault was practically like one of those air tight steel chests, forget flies, even wind could not get in. So how did that Embroidery Bandit get in? Beside the Vault was a rather small structure, it was pitch black inside.

Like a bird, he took off. By now he had completely given up and only wanted to find a way out as soon as possible. At the moment that he took off, he suddenly noticed a person stood up inside of that small building. It was a pale faced man with a light beard who was dressed completely in a snow white robe. Inside of the darkness, his eyes were like a pair of cold stars. Lu Xiao Feng's heart sank, and his body sank as well.

With a sudden "Thousand Ton Boulder", he landed on the ground. At this precise moment, he saw the flash of a sword speeding directly towards him from the opposite roof top. He had never in his life seen such a spectacular and fast sword flash.

Suddenly, it was as if his entire body was enveloped inside of an aura, the aura of the sword, an aura that chills a man, any man, to the very center of his bones. The flash of the blade seemed, unbelievably, to be

even scarier than Xi Men Chui Xue's. Almost nobody in the world could defend against this strike. Lu Xiao Feng could not either, could not even if he tried. He tapped the ground with his foot and began backing up. The sword flash followed him, chased after him. No matter how fast he backed up, he could not get away for the strike, nevermind that he had just ran out of space to back up.

His body was already flat against one of the walls of the Vault. The sword flash, like a bolt of lightning, hurled towards his chest. It was no use to try and dodge to either side, even if he could. Whatever move he could pull off now would be too slow, too late. He was staring at certain death!

But at this moment, his chest suddenly caved in, caved in to the point where it looked glued to his spine. The sword strike had been precisely measured in terms of strength and position, but could not have, and did not, take into account that his body could suddenly become thinner. This change was something that was unimaginable for anyone. So when the sword flash reached him, it stopped where it was supposed to, because by now his chest should have been pierced and there was no point in putting in more energy and thrusting the sword any further.

Real masters are very precise and miserly about every bit of energy they expend so as to not waste even a little. Not to mention that this man was a Master among masters! He could have never imagined that this strike would not hit its target. But Lu Xiao Feng still had no where to go, all he had to do was simply push his sword forward a little bit more and Lu Xiao Feng would still be dead.

But, at this crucial instant, Lu Xiao Feng struck! He suddenly reached out with two fingers and caught the blade with them! Nobody could describe the quickness and dexterity of this move, for if you did not see it

with your own eyes, you would have never believed it. The white robed man descended back onto the ground. He did not exert anymore force onto his sword but instead merely coldly stared at Lu Xiao Feng with those star like eyes of his.

Lu Xiao Feng returned his stare.

"Master of WhiteCloudCastle?" He suddenly asked.

"You can tell?" The man coldly replied.

"Other than Master of White Cloud Castle, who else in the world could make a strike like that?" Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

The man finally nodded.

"Lu Xiao Feng?" He suddenly asked as well.

"You can tell?"

"Other than Lu Xiao Feng, who else could with stand that strike from me?" Lu Xiao Feng smiled. Anybody would be joyous after hearing "Master of White Cloud Castle" say that. It was said that he never complimented or praised anybody, but that sentence was undoubtly a praise.

"Four years ago, you used the same move and caught a sword strike from the Wooden Taoist." Ye Gu Cheng continued. "To this day he still

proclaims that move is absolutely peerless in this world."

"He's my friend, a lot of people likes to exaggerate a little about their friends!" Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"Four months ago, he saw me using that strike: 'Heavenly Angel'. He also proclaimed that move to be without equal in the world."

"It truly is!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"But he still thought that you could stop that move of mine!"

"Oh?"

"I didn't believe it, so I had to give it a try!"

"You actually knew that I was going to come here?"

Ye Gu Cheng nodded.

"And you were waiting here for me?"

Ye Gu Cheng nodded again.

"What if I couldn't catch that strike?"

"Then you are not Lu Xiao Feng!" Ye Gu Cheng plainly answered.

"Even Lu Xiao Feng might not have caught that strike of yours!" Lu Xiao Feng meekly smiled.

"If Lu Xiao Feng did not catch that strike, then Lu Xiao Feng would not be Lu Xiao Feng now."

"If Lu Xiao Feng did not catch that strike, then Lu Xiao Feng would be dead by now!"

"Correct!" Ye Gu Cheng coldly agreed. "A dead man is just that, a dead man. A corpse don't have any names!"

He suddenly pulled back and the sword returned to its sheath. He was also the first one to pull his sword out from between Lu Xiao Feng's fingers.

"Looks like you don't want to kill me after all!" Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"Oh?"

"Because if you want to, right now is another opportunity to do it."

Ye Gu Cheng stared at Lu Xiao Feng's face.

"There aren't that many foes like you in this world. For every one killed

is another one less of you!" He slowly said. Within those star like eyes of his there suddenly flashed a hint of loneliness. "I'm a very proud man, so I don't have any friends. I don't care about that. But to live in a world without any worthy opponent, now that is real loneliness."

Lu Xiao Feng was staring at him as well.

"If you want a friend, you can always find one!" He smiled.

"Oh?"

"Well, at least you can find one right at this moment!"

"Looks like they weren't lying about you, you really are a person who likes to make friends!" Ye Gu Cheng's eyes seemed to show a little bit of joy in them.

"They? Who are they?"

Ye Gu Cheng did not answer, nor did he need too. Because Lu Xiao Feng had already noticed Jin Jiu Ling and Hua Man Lou.

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly noticed that Ye Gu Cheng and Xi Men Chui Xue had a lot in common. They were both very lonely and very proud men. Neither of them held lives in great regards - be it their foes lives or their very own, it was the same to them. Their moves were always merciless, because their styles consists entirely of fatal moves and strikes. Both of them also liked to wear white clothes.

And both of them were cold like those far away glaciers on those distant mountains. -Could it be that only this kind of man can master that kind of peerless, unmatched sword skills? When Lu Xiao Feng lifted up his wine cup, he noticed another thing. Ye Gu Cheng also did not touch alcohol, he did not even drink tea. The only thing he drinks was pure water. As soon as Lu Xiao Feng lifted his cup, the wine had entered his mouth.

Ye Gu Cheng looked at him, as if he was very surprised.

"Do you drink quite a lot of wine?" He asked.

"And I drink them quite fast as well!" Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"That's why I'm puzzled!"

"You find drinking to be a very puzzling thing?"

"Wine can damage one's body and could distort one's mind. But yet you are still at your peak both physically and mentally!"

"Actually, I don't often drink this much," Lu Xiao Feng smiled. "Only when I'm sad do I drink as viciously as this!"

"You are sad?"

"How can a guy not be when he's been betrayed by his friends?"

Hua Man Lou smiled, of course he knew what Lu Xiao Feng was saying.

"Do you think that we had betrayed you?" Jin Jiu Ling was smiling as well.

"You guys knew I was going to come here, and you guys knew that there was peerless sword waiting for me here. And yet you two made like a pair of Cao Cao's and watched the show on the sideline." Lu Xiao Feng put up a serious face.

"We knew that you were going to come here because we knew that you had to see for yourself if anybody could have gotten into the Vault!" replied Jin Jiu Ling.

"So that's why you guys were waiting here for me, to see if I could get in!"

"But only when you jumped onto the roof did we notice you!" admitted Jin Jiu Ling.

"And then you waited to see if I would really be killed by Master Yie!"

"You know very well that he did not really want to kill you!" Jin Jiu Ling protested.

"But that strike was real!"

"Lu Xiao Feng was real too!" Jin Jiu Ling laughed. He was truly a man who has a way with words. It was impossible for anyone to get mad at him. "Before you came, we had all arrived at a conclusion!"

"What's that?"

"That if Lu Xiao Feng could not get in, then there's not a human in the world that could."

"Is that Embroidery Bandit not a human?"

Jin Jiu Ling did not reply.

"I really could not find a way inside; even if I had the keys to the Vault, I could not have opened the doors without the guards noticing; even if I did open the doors, there's no way that I could have lockd the doors from the outside."

"When Jiang Chong Wei entered the Vault that day, the door was locked from the outside!" said Jin Jiu Ling.

"I know."

"So, logic dictates that there must be another way inside the Vault and that's the way that the Embroidery Bandit used!"

"But in reality a way like that does not exist."

"It must exist," Hua Man Lou suddenly said. "It's just that we can't find it."

Ye Gu Cheng had been quietly and coldly sitting there watching them, seemingly completely uninterested in this matter. He was only interested in one thing.

"Xi Men Chui Xue is your friend?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"There's a person waiting for me outside, can you guys guess who this person is?" He suddenly asked. He was afraid that Ye Gu Cheng would start asking about Xi Men Chui Xue, so as soon as he asked, he changed the subject.

But Ye Gu Cheng did not want to change the subject.

"Have you ever exchanged moves with him?"

"No!" Lu Xiao Feng had to answer this time.

"How is his sword skills?"

"Not bad." Lu Xiao Feng forced a smile.

"Did Du Gu Yi He die under his sword?"

Lu Xiao Feng had to nod.

"Then that means that his sword skills are already above that of the Wooden Taoist's." A look of joy and excitement suddenly appeared on Ye Gu Cheng's cold face as he slowly continued. "If I could test myself against him, then that would truly a joy of my life!"

"Wine, how come there aren't any wine here!" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly stood up and declared.

"Let me go fetch some for you." Jin Jiu Ling offered.

"Fetch some from where?"

"There's a wine cellar here."

"That you can get in?"

"There probably isn't a place in this RoyalPalace that he couldn't get in now!" Hua Man Lou laughed at Lu Xiao Feng's question.

"Really?"

"You infiltrated the RoyalPalace and yet don't know who's the newly appointed Warden of the RoyalPalace?" asked Hua Man Lou.

"Could Warden Jin please lead the way to the wine cellar?" Lu Xiao Feng laughed and requested.

The wine cellar was in that small little building beside the Vault. Jin Jiu Ling opened the door with his keys. A guard had already lit the lantern for them.

After entering the room, they had to lift up one of the stone slabs and walk down several flights of stairs before arriving at the wine cellar. And such a huge wine cellar it is!

"If I was a real alcoholic, then you couldn't force me to leave this place even if you had a knife up against my neck!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"I know plenty of people who think that you have problems, but you certainly aren't an alcoholic!" Jin Jiu Ling smiled.

"Really?"

"You came here simply because you are afraid that Ye Gu Cheng might force you to take him to Xi Men Chui Xue!"

"I really am afraid of those 2 meetings." Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "Once either one of them unsheathes his sword, almost nobody in the world could make them put the sword back in!"

"But they will meet sooner or later!"

"And what would happen on that day is something that I'm too scared to even think about!" Lu Xiao Feng smiled a tired smile.

"You are afraid that he might kill Xi Men Chui Xue?"

"I'm also afraid that Xi Men Chui Xue might kill him!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "Both of them are one of a kind swordsmen. If either one of them died it would be an irreconcilable loss. The scariest thing is that both of them only know killing moves. Once the sword becomes unsheathed, then somebody has to die!"

"Absolutely have to die?"

"Mmhmm!"

"But there's no such thing as an 'absolute' in this world!" Jin Jiu Ling smiled.

"Oh?"

"That Vault was supposed to be 'absolutely' impenetrable, but yet somebody did get in it. He couldn't have very well fell out of the sky or popped up from the ground could he?"

Lu Xiao Feng's eyes suddenly lit up.

"Is this wine cellar underneath the Vault?"

"Seems like it!"

"If the two of us dig a hole in the ceiling of this place, could we not get into the Vault?"

Jin Jiu Ling's eyes lit up as well.

"The outside of this wine cellar might not be tightly guarded, but one would still have to have a key to get in here!" Jin Jiu Ling observed.

"Did Jiang Chong Wei have the key?"

Jin Jiu Ling nodded.

"But he would never give the key to the Embroidery Bandit!"

"Of course he wouldn't, but somebody else would!"

"Who?"

"Someone that could get close to him, someone that could take the key off of him and make an imprint of it!"

"Do you think it could be Jiang Qing Xia?" Jin Jiu Ling's eyes were glowing.

"Looks like you aren't known as the smartest man inside of the Six

Doors for nothing!" Lu Xiao Feng heavily patted him on the shoulder.

Carrying a huge jug of wine with him, Lu Xiao Feng made his way back. He had decided to have a real celebration. He was not sure if he had ever been this happy before.

"What are you two so happy about? Did you guys find some treasure in the middle of the wine cellar?" Hua Man Lou asked upon hearing their laughter.

"That's right!" Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

What kind of treasure?"

"A thread!"

"A thread? What kind of thread?" Hua Man Lou did not understand.

"The kind that you can't see, but all we have to do is to follow this thread and we'll be able to find that fox's tail!"

"What fox?" Hua Man Lou was still a bit confused.

"A fox that knows how to embroider, of course!" Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

Now, finally, he could be sure of something. Jiang Qing Xia and that Embroidery Bandit was from the same organization. So all he had to do

was find Jiang Qing Xia and he would be able to find the Embroidery Bandit.

"Are you sure that you can find Jiang Qing Xia?"

"A little bit."

"How are you planning on going about looking for her?"

"I'm planning on finding a pair of red shoes. A pair of red shoes that shouldn't be worn, but was for some reason was worn!"

"Your ideas are getting less and less comprehensible!" Hua Man Lou sighed and smiled.

"I guarantee that you'll understand one of these days!" Lu Xiao Feng laughed. He suddenly noticed that someone was missing in the room. "Where's Ye Gu Cheng?"

"He doesn't like drinking, and doesn't like watching other people drink, and now it had gotten to the time for him to go to sleep!" Hua Man Lou answered.

"Do you really think he's gone to sleep?"

"I only know that if he really wants to go find Xi Men Chui Xue, then nobody can stop him!" Hua Man Lou sighed again.

Lu Xiao Feng did not get drunk often, but he often liked to pretend to be drunk. Because when he pretends to be drunk, he could make all the noise he wants without getting in trouble for it. Hua Man Lou did not mind him making all that noise, but this was the Royal Palace, he did not want Lu Xiao Feng to smash Jin Jiu Ling's meal ticket.

Lu Xiao Feng banged his chopstick on the wine cup to keep beat.

"Yellow River travels among the white clouds,

"Lonely castle sits upon the blade like mountain.

"Why must the flute use the willows to say goodbye,

"The spring wind could never pass Yu Men Gate."

Those were the famous words of the Tang poet Wang Zhi Huan, and also happened to be the Master of White Cloud Castle Ye Gu Cheng's favorite poem. Obviously, he was still thinking about Ye Gu Cheng, obviously, he was still not drunk.

{I apologize for the crude translation of this wonderful poem. For those who understand Chinese:

Huang He yun shang bai yun bian,

Yi pian gu cheng wan ren shan.

Qiang di he xu chou yang liu,

Chun feng bu du yu men guan.

This poem is one of the greatest and most famous poems in China. It actually has quite a number of things to do with Ye Gu Cheng. The “Gu Cheng” in Ye Gu Cheng’s name means “lonely castle/city” and his nickname fits perfectly with this poem. Yu Men Gate itself is symbolic and is the gate most often alluded to in Chinese poetry. It is situated where the Great Wall meets the Yellow River. Also, it suggests something about the character of Ye Gu Cheng. When the last lines talk about how the spring winds never pass the Yu Men Gate, it means that the willow trees would never flourish, due to the lack of Spring.}

He finished singing one poem and moved onto the next. Finished that one and moved onto another one. As if he was just itching to sing these poems out loud.

“You said someone was waiting for you outside, who is it?” Hua Man Lou suddenly asked.

Lu Xiao Feng stopped singing. Of course, he was not really drunk, but Xue Bing could very well be. When a person is anxious and mad, it is always very easy to get drunk. Lu Xiao Feng jumped up and charged out.

“So who do you think is waiting for him outside?” Jin Jiu Ling asked.

“It has to be Xue Bing!” Hua Man Lou did not even have to think about that one.

“It has to be!”

“I know that Xue Bing has always liked him very much, and he has

always liked Xue Bing a lot!"

But Xue Bing was not waiting for him at the inn. In fact, she had not even returned there since he left her. Lu Xiao Feng knew that, at this moment, there was only one way for him to find Xue Bing - the Snake King. This time he had no need for someone to lead the way.

The night was deep, but the Snake King was still not asleep. He was not surprised at the sight of Lu Xiao Feng either.

"I've been waiting for you!"

"You were waiting for me? Did you know I was going to come here?"

The Snake King nodded.

"Have Xue Bing been here?" He probed further.

The Snake King nodded again.

"She had been here for a long time, drinking. Drinking a lot. And she said a lot as well!"

"What did she say?"

"She said that you were a jerk and a half, and that you were not a man at all." Even though he was smiling, a hint of worry could be discerned

from his smile.

"She must have been drunk!" Lu Xiao Feng meekly smiled.

"But she insisted on leaving, insisted on going to find you. I couldn't stop her, but I couldn't just let her go like that. So all I could do was sent 2 men to tail her and protect her in case anything happened!"

"Have those two men returned?"

"They won't be coming back!" The Snake King sighed.

"Why not?" Lu Xiao Feng's expression changed.

"Someone has already found their bodies, but Lady Xue was no where to be seen!" The Snake King's expression was very serious.

The bodies were found in a dark alley. The fatal blows were inflicted on their eyes. By the time they died, they were already blind.

"The Embroidery Bandit!" Lu Xiao Feng's body went cold. Could Xue Bing have already fallen into that Bandit's hands? Could she have possibly know that Lu Xiao Feng has already discovered her secret? At least this proved one thing - that clue that Lu Xiao Feng found was correct! To be able to find an unchallenged fact in these swirling clouds of doubt and conjectures was suppose to be a joyous thing. But Lu Xiao Feng felt as if his heart had sank to the bottom of his feet and was being stepped on by himself. He suddenly discovered that his feelings towards Xue Bing was much more intense than he had ever suspected. Upon his

return to the little pavilion, he found the Snake King still waiting for him. Without a word, the Snake King poured a cup of wine and pushed it towards him. Lu Xiao Feng picked up the cup, but then placed it back down.

"Don't you want a drink?"

"I just want to clear my head a little!" Lu Xiao Feng forced a smile onto his face. His smile made him look as if he was crying. The Snake King had never seen him so sad before.

"I have over 3000 brothers working for me, as long as Lady Xue is still inside the city, I will find her!" His words were not meant to console Lu Xiao Feng, he really did have that power. But, by the time he finds Xue Bing, her body might be cold as well.

"Have you ever heard of a bearded guy who sews?" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly asked.

"Even though I nevered, I figured that you were here because of this matter!" The Snake King nodded.

"Those two men died into that person's hands, so..."

"So you are afraid that Lady Xue has also fallen into this person's hands?"

Lu Xiao Feng picked up the cup once again.

But this time it was the Snake King that stopped him.

"If you really want to clear your head a little, then the best way to do that is to sleep for a bit!"

"If you were me, could you sleep?" Lu Xiao Feng smiled a tired smile.

"I haven't slept a night in 10 years now," The Snake King smiled a tired smile as well. "This is an illness too. But this illness had made me an authority on this, so I have some medicine specifically for this problem."

It was a white powder and it came inside a green, transparent, jade flask. The Snake King poured out a little into the wine.

"You could sit here and stare out into space for the next 10 years and you would still not be able to save Lady Xue. But if you could sleep a little and clear your thoughts up, maybe you could figure out a way to save her."

Lu Xiao Feng hesitated before finally gulping down the cup of wine.

By the time he woke up, it was already day, the sunlight poured in through the green silk curtains. The Snake King was sitting underneath the curtains and, with a snow white piece of cloth, polishing a sword. A very thin and narrow sword that was made from top quality iron smelt

over hundreds of times. Normally, this sword could be wrapped around one's waist like a belt. This was the Snake King's famous weapon: "Nimble Snake Sword".

"What are you doing?" Lu Xiao Feng frowned as he sat up.

"I'm polishing my sword."

"But you haven't used that sword in at least 10 years."

"I'm only polishing it, I'm not preparing to use it."

He did not look Lu Xiao Feng in the eye, as if he was afraid that Lu Xiao Feng might find a secret of some sort. Even bathed in sunlight, his complexion was scarily pale. Only those who truly suffers from insomnia can know how frightening and how painful it is. It is not a sickness or illness but a punishment and torture more frightening than any sickness or illness. This man had already been tortured for 10 years.

Lu Xiao Feng stared at him.

"And I have never asked you about your past!" He finally said slowly after a long time.

"You haven't."

"I didn't ask, maybe only because I already knew!"

"What do you know?" The Snake King's expression immediately changed.

"I know you did not start off being the Snake King. A person like you would never be a Snake King unless you were trying to get away from something very painful."

"Being the Snake King isn't exactly an unseemly thing," The Snake King coldly replied. "Can't you tell that I live a much more comfortable life than most of the people in the world?"

"But you are not this kind of a man. If not for escape, you would never hide yourself inside of the dark alleys of the city!"

"What kind of a man am I then?"

"I don't know, I only know that you are my friend. And between friends there should only be truths!"

The Snake King's complexion turned even paler before he suddenly let out an exhausted sigh.

"You weren't supposed to wake up so soon!"

"But I am already awake now!"

"What do you think I'm running away from?"

"Hatred and revenge! There's not that many things in the world that can cause as much pain as that kind of hate!"

The Snake King's expression was truly very painful.

"You came here in order to escape that hate and hid yourself within the dark alleys of the city. Because you know your enemy, your nemesis, could never imagine that you have turned into a Snake King."

The Snake King wanted to refute this, but did not open his mouth.

"But you could never forget this hatred either. That's why as soon as you get the chance, no matter what, you are going to finish this whole ordeal!" He suddenly walked over, placed his hands on the Snake King's shoulder, stared him straight in the eye, and said, emphasizing every word. "Did you find your chance now? Did you find information on your nemesis' whereabouts?"

The Snake King's mouth remained closed, but his expression became even more painful!

"Who is your nemesis? Is that person inside the city?"

The Snake King's mouth still remained closed.

"You don't have to tell me, but then I don't have to let you leave either."

"You have enough things to worry about by yourself, why are you

meddling in other people's business?" The Snake King coldly demanded with a straight face.

"I know full well that you don't want other people to return your favors, that's the reason you are not telling me."

The Snake King closed his mouth again.

"And I don't want to repay you any favors either, I just want to work out a trade with you!"

"What trade?" The Snake King could not help but ask.

"Let me go deal with that person for you, and you find Xue Bing for me!"

"You are right," The Snake King tightly balled up his fists, but those thin and pale hands of his could not stop shaking. "I do have a nemesis, and I do have unfinished business that I want to address with that person."

"So my guesses were right!"

"Since this is entirely my own personal matter, why should I let you go in my place?" The Snake King snickered.

"Because your hands are shaking," Lu Xiao Feng snickered back. "Because you have been sick for 10 years, because you have been tortured to the point where you don't even look like a man anymore."

Because if you go now, it would be just suicide!"

The Snake King's stiff body suddenly went limp on his chair, as if his entire body had just collapsed.

But Lu Xiao Feng still did not relent. "Maybe that's what you wanted all along, to die. Because you feel that staying alive was much more painful than death. But I don't want to see you die in that person's hands, and do not want to see the person that condemned you to this state live on in this world." He grabbed those cold hands of Snake King's tightly and continued, emphasizing every single word. "Because we are friends!"

The Snake King looked into his eyes, suddenly, tears began to flow out as if from a fountain.

"Have you ever seen my wife? Of course you haven't. So you will also never know how warm and gentle of a woman she was." He mumbled. "Have you ever seen my 2 sons? They were both smart and cute kids, they were only 5 and 6..."

"Have they all died in that person's hands?" Lu Xiao Feng asked through his tightly clenched jaw.

"She's not a person!" The Snake King began sobbing even more, his voice croaked even more. "Her heart is more poisonous than those of snakes or scorpions, her methods are crueller than those of monsters. Maybe she's just a demonese that had escaped from the depth of hell!"

"She's a woman?"

The Snake King nodded.

"What's her name?"

"First Madame Gong Sun."

The Snake King explained some more. "Her real name is Gong Sun Lan, 'Lan' as in orchid. Rumor say that she is the descendent of that famed beauty First Madame Gong Sun of the Early Tang. So people who know her all call her First Madame Gong Sun as well."

"But I don't know her, I haven't even heard of that name before."

"She's not famous, nor does she want to be famous. She thinks that fame would only bring with it trouble."

"At least she could be described as a very intelligent woman." sighed Lu Xiao Feng. Who else could know more about the troubles and worries that came along with being famous better than Lu Xiao Feng?

"But she had used many other names, those names you probably do know about!"

"Oh?"

"Female Butcher, Peach Flower Wasp, Lady Five Poison, Soul Robbing Granny.... You should have heard of all these names before!"

"They are all her?" Lu Xiao Feng's expression changed.

"Every last one of them."

"Looks like she truly is a very powerful and frightening woman." Lu Xiao Feng sighed and asked. "If her movements are so secretive, then how did you find her?"

"I didn't find her, she found me." The Snake King reached into his shirt and took out a wadded up but later flattened envelope.

"I know who you are, and I also know you must really want to see me. The dusk of the full moon, I'll be waiting for you in the West Garden. It would be best if you bring some silver with you and invite me to some of those famed vegetable cookings there."

The handwriting was very pretty, very elegant. Where one signs one's name was drawn a single orchid instead.

"She handed that to one of my men in the southern part of the city with instructions to give it to me personally!"

"She didn't give this to you personally, maybe it was because she didn't know where you live!" Lu Xiao Feng mused after thinking it over.

"There aren't that many that could get in this little place of mine!"

"WestGarden, is it that the WestGarden that has a row of plum trees in it?"

"Yes."

"And today is the day of the full moon?"

"Today is the 15th."

"She arranged the meeting to be at night, it's still early and you are all ready to go?"

"What time do you think this is? Morning?"

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly noticed that the sunlight outside was fading, it was getting close to sunset.

"That dose was suppose to make you sleep until tomorrow morning, but it seems like no medicine is strong enough to be effective on you."

"Maybe it's because I'm about to go completely numb anyways." Lu Xiao Feng meekly smiled.

"I know I'm absolutely not a match for her," The Snake King stared at Lu Xiao Feng. "But you...."

"You don't have to worry about me. I have ran into people 10 times

deadlier than her and I'm still here." He did not let the Snake King reply and continued. "But, there's still one thing that worries me!"

"What?"

"I'm worried that I might not find her. Since she has all kinds of different names, then she must have all kinds of different incarnations. Besides, all some women have to do is change their clothes and hair and they would look completely different."

"Her disguises are truly works of art and she very rarely shows her true face to anyone. But she has a flaw, as long as you know this flaw, then you would always recognize her!"

Seems like every woman has a flaw of some kind or another.

"What's hers?" Lu Xiao Feng giggled a little.

"Her flaw is very unusual." Seems like the smarter and prettier the woman is, the more unusual her flaw is. "She has a habit. No matter what she wears, no matter who she pretends to be, the shoes she wear never changes!"

"What kind of shoes does she wear?" Lu Xiao Feng's eyes lit up.

"Red shoes!"

Lu Xiao Feng literally jumped.

“Blood red embroidered shoes, like those that brides wear on their wedding days. Except it’s not loons that are sewn on them, but owls!”

Chapter 6 - Clever Escape Plan

The WestGarden was located in the western part of the city. It was a huge flower park as well as a garden. The sun had set already, under the tree shade, inside the gazebos and the pavilions were lit with a series of star like lanterns. Flowing through the air with the night breeze was the flower fragrances, and wine fragrances as well. The Moon was round like a mirror as it hung gingerly from one of the trees. Two all, cherry-colored, cotton trees linked together with interconnected roots, and leaned into each other, like two lovers tenderly embracing each other.

Lu Xiao Feng was suddenly reminded of Xue Bing again. Whenever Xue Bing appeared in his thoughts, it was as if somebody pricked his heart with a needle. He was not a heartless man, but he also know that this was not the time to mope about. He had already walked around the park once. There were not that many female visitors tonight, but he has yet to spot any woman wearing red shoes. But he was not getting anxious.

Because Gong Sun Lan did not know there was someone like Lu Xiao Feng looking for her in this park. This had undoubtly given him the edge. The cold dish shaped Moon hhad slowly risen higher and higher in the night sky. The dim and hazy moon light was beautiful enough to intoxicate one's heart. If Xue Bing was here by my side, she would surely be nagging to me about finding a seat and ordering a huge serving of that famed cooking that this place was known for.

In front of others, she was always very shy, blushing before she would or could even utter a word. But just put her together with Lu Xiao Feng, then she suddenly seemed to turn into a spoiled little kid. Yapping about this thing one minute, nagging about something else the next, there was

hardly a moment of peace to be had. Lu Xiao Feng suddenly discovered something - he liked her nagging, liked hearing her nag, watching her nag, liked watching her throwing a mischievous fit in front of him, liked her...

He stopped himself from thinking any further. He was prepared to go take a walk somewhere else.

Just as he was about to turn away, he suddenly noticed a granny come walking out from underneath the shadows of a tree. She was a very old granny and wore a green dress or robe that had been patched over hundreds of times over. There seemed to be a huge rock placed on her back that seemed to have snapped her spine in half.

So when she walked, she was always bent over as if she was looking for something on the ground. The moon light hit her face and revealed it to be one full of wrinkles, like a piece of cotton paper that someone had already wadded up but then flattened out again.

"Sugar roasted chestnuts!" She had hanging from her arm a very big bamboo basket that was covered over with a very thick cotton cloth. "Fresh sugar roasted chestnuts, delicious and hot. Just ten farthings a catty!"

This poor and lonely old woman who had already entered the twilight still needed to come out and yell as loud as her already coarse voice would let her to sell sugar roasted chestnuts.

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly felt very bad for her, after all, he was a very compassionate man.

"Gramps, over here, I'll buy two catties." The chestnuts really did smell delicious and hot, and fresh too, just as advertised.

"Did you say ten farthings for a catty?"

The granny nodded, she was still bent over as if she was fascinated by Lu Xiao Feng's shoes, but in reality it was because she could not stand upright anymore.

"No, ten farthings a catty can't possibly do!" Lu Xiao Feng shook his head.

"Only ten farthings sire, do you still think it's too much?"

"Such good chestnuts are worth at least 10 taels of silver a catty and I would not buy it for a farthing less!"

The granny smiled. The smile made the wrinkles on her face even more prominent. - Is this guy a dummy or is he somebody that had only experienced an incredibly privileged and expensive existence?

"Ten taels of silver a catty, if you are willing to sell it for that price, then I'll buy two catties off of you."

Of course the granny would be willing to sell.

"I would even be willing to sell for 20 taels of silver a catty!" Why must

people get a little more greedy when they get older?

"But I have something that I need your help with!" Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"Sire, what can an old bag of bones like myself possibly help you with?"
The granny tentatively smiled back.

"Only you could do this!"

Why?

"Because you are bent over like that so that it looks like you are looking for something on the ground to begin with." Lu Xiao Feng smiled. "I need for you to find something for me!"

Find what?

"I want you to find a woman who is wearing a pair of red shoes for me. Not just any red shoes, a pair of red shoes with owls embroidered on them."

The granny smiled as well. There was nothing more appropriate to ask of someone like her. Even if she dove underneath the dresses of others, nobody would ever get suspicious of her.

She took the 20 taels of silver into her hands. Her smile was so wide that her eyes were like little slits.

"Just wait here sire, I'll tell you as soon as I find it."

"If you can find her, then I'll buy 5 more catties off of you when you get back."

The granny happily went on her way. Lu Xiao Feng was happy too, not just happy, but proud too. Only someone as smart as himself could have thought of such an ingenious method to do this. He suddenly realized he was a genius. But he forgot something - genius' lives are usually short lived!

The chestnuts were still hot, hot and mouth-watering. Lu Xiao Feng decided to congratulate himself a bit for his hard work. He found a large and relatively clean rock to sit on. After sitting himself down, he peeled off the shell off of a chestnut and was just about to put it in his mouth when he suddenly thought of Xue Bing again. Xue Bing loved to eat chestnuts. On cold days, she would always first place the chestnuts in her lap and use them to warm her hands before slowly eating them one by one. One particular time when Lu Xiao Feng met her, she was just in the middle of eating chestnuts.

That day was freezing. Lu Xiao Feng's hands felt as if they were about to fall off in the freezing cold. It was her who grabbed his hands and placed them in her lap. Even to this day, that sweet warmth seemed to be still residing at the very tip of Lu Xiao Feng's fingers. But where is she now? How could anyone expect Lu Xiao Feng to be able to eat this chestnut?

From the distant flower bushes, a sad and lonely song came floating through the night air.

"Messy ebony hair, lost broken night, the hate carrying eye brow thinks of the distant hills, the fragrance carrying cheek tender budding bamboo shoot, for whom do the tears flow, for whom do the tears share?"

The beautiful songstress voice was filled with a kind of thick and unpenetrable memorance.

Lu Xiao Feng gently sighed. Those chestnuts that were kept in place by the sash across his lap fell onto the ground and scattered. Even he himself did not realize that he was such a sentimental and worried man.

He leaned up against a tree beside the rock he was sitting on and closed his eyes.

"What if I don't ever find her again?"

He suddenly felt terribly depressed and hopeless, not even wanting to move even a little. So motionless was he that he looked like a dead man. It was at this time that the chestnut selling granny reappeared from behind the shadows. Lu Xiao Feng's eyes were not completely closed, he left a little slit open.

His initial reaction was to sit up and ask that granny if she had found that woman with the red shoes. But suddenly, he noticed that those old and hazy eyes of hers were beaming with a killer, knife-like glow. A granny like this should never have that look in her eyes.

Lu Xiao Feng's heart suddenly seemed to be pierced by a streak of light, a light of inspiration. He even held his breath. The granny took a look at

him, looked at the chestnuts scattered on the ground, at his dried lips, her lips curled into a hideous and sinister smile. Underneath the shade of the tree, Lu Xiao Feng's complexion was deathly pale.

"Such good chestnuts," the granny mumbled. "Just one is enough to kill at least 3 men, it would be such a waste to just leave them here."

So she slowly limped over. Lu Xiao Feng suddenly realized even though the way she walked was slow and cumbersome, her steps were very light. The dress that she was wearing was extremely long so that it dragged on the ground, covering her feet. What kind of shoes were on those feet? Lu Xiao Feng suddenly opened his eyes, staring at her. Incredibly, the granny was not surprised, at least, Lu Xiao Feng did not notice any signs of surprise on her.

She was truly quite an unshakable woman to be able to hold her composure and actually smile like she did during their first meeting.

"There don't seem to be any woman with red shoes around here, but there were two with yellow and purple shoes!"

Lu Xiao Feng returned her smile.

"There is one woman with red shoes here too, I have already found her!"

"You have already found her sire? Where did you find her?"

"Right here. You!"

"Me?" The granny looked at him in shock. "Why would an old granny like me where red shoes?"

"My eyes can see through things." Lu Xiao Feng matter of factly claimed. "And I can see right at this moment those red shoes that are on your feet, and that owl embroidered on the shoes!"

The granny suddenly laughed. Her laughter sounded like a series of silver bells, no, even more pleasing to the ear than silver bells.

"You didn't eat my sugar roasted chestnuts?"

"No."

"Such delicious sugar roasted chestnuts, why didn't you eat any?"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Because I'm a romantic!"

"Romantic people don't eat sugar roasted chestnuts?" The granny blinked.

"Sometimes we do, but only those non-poisonous kind."

The granny laughed, silver bell like laughter.

"Lu Xiao Feng really is Lu Xiao Feng after all!"

"You knew that I'm Lu Xiao Feng?"

"How many people in the world have 4 eye brows on their face?" She laughed.

Lu Xiao Feng laughed. His laughter was, of course, not as moving as this granny's, this was because he was not really laughing anyways. He knew that this granny was about to strike, and also knew that this strike would not be easy to handle. He was right.

At the precise moment that he began to laugh, this granny had taken out a pair of short swords, daggers, from her basket, swords with a bright red silk sash tied to them. At the precise moment that he saw those swords, the swords flashed as their blades have arrived at his throat. Such quick strike! Such quick swords!

Lu Xiao Feng did not dare to catch those swords with his hands, he was afraid that the blades have poison coated on them. Normally he might be a very careless and casual guy, but at these crucial moments of life and death, there were not many more prudent and careful than him to be found in this world. Like a diving fish, he suddenly floated away. Not only was the reaction quick, the movement itself was quicker. But no matter where he went the bright and dancing flash of the swords would follow him.

The sword flashes were colorful and flickering, under the relentless and freezing power of the sword aura, the leaves on the trees were torn off of

their branches and gently floated down towards the ground only to be shredded into oblivion an instant later by the sword flashes. Lu Xiao Feng was already soaked in sweat. He had thought that Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng were the more fearsome swordsmen in the world, but he did not imagine that there was someone like this in the world.

“Gong Sun Beauty of the past, a dance the swords move all directions, observers like mountains lose their color in sadness, world admits defeat and forever bows.”

“Magnificent like Yi shooting down the 9 suns, proud like the Emperors bucking on the dragon’s back, arriving like the thunder loudly madly shaking, gone like the pureness of the rivers and the seas....”

There might not be any mountain like observes here, but the colors on Lu Xiao Feng’s face had already been lost. Even the bright full moon had lost its brightness and colors under this freezing sword aura. Could this possibly be the very sword dance that the Madame Cui Gong Sun of yesteryears had taught to her disciples?

Only now did Lu Xiao Feng fully realize that the silk and sword not only could be used for a dance for someone’s entertainment, but could also be used to kill. At any moment, he could die under these swords. Using and controlling those swords with the red silks made the swords much quicker and much more manuevrealbe than just simply using one’s hands. And the quickness with which the swords changed their moves and their variances were absolutely mind boggling.

Lu Xiao Feng’s shirt had already been sliced open at several places as he was now forced with his back completely against the trunk of a tree.

"Pch!" The sound reverberated as the swords flew through the air like a pair of red dragons towards him. This time there was no where for him to escape to.

The corner of First Madame Gong Sun's lips once again curled up into a sinister smile. But she did know that Lu Xiao Feng's best ability is to be able to find a way to live in situation of certain death. Suddenly, his body slid down on the tree trunk like a snake, and slid down all the way onto the ground.

"Dong!" The blades of the swords had struck the trunk of the tree full on and penetrated deep into them. At that moment, Lu Xiao Feng sprung up from the ground and, with a backwards flick of his hands, snapped the two silk sashes tied to the sword handles in half! This was the equivalent of cutting off two sword holding hands. First Madame Gong Sun's body sprung as well as she flipped in midair, sending her long dress flying. Finally, Lu Xiao Feng saw her shoes. Red shoes!

The bright moon still hung in the middle of the sky, the red shoes could only be glimpsed for an instant in the moonlight before she was already more than 10 meters away. Of course, Lu Xiao Feng was not willing to let her get away like this. But by the time he began to chase, he was already a step behind. A step that he could not make up.

No matter what he did, the distance between them kept a steady 10 meters. Lu Xiao Feng had met and seen quite a number of the best lightness kungfu masters in the martial world. Of course, Si Kong Zhai Xin was the best among them, but Yan Tie Shan, Huo Tian Qing, Xi Men Chui Xue, Honest Monk were not too shabby either.

But if it had been these men running away from Lu Xiao Feng at this moment, he might have already have caught them. He suddenly discovered that not only was this "granny"'s sword skills formidable, but also a lightness kungfu master of a level that he had never encountered before. Flowers, trees, gardens, woods, gazebos, platforms, pavilions, mansions, they all flew by underneath their feet and disappeared.

What followed was one roof top after another, one street after another. First Madane Gong Sun still did not slow down, obviously, she was not a granny beset by her old age. But Lu Xiao Feng was a strong young man at the peak of his mental and physical abilities, so he did not slow down either.

First Madame Gong Sun had already realized that getting rid of this guy behind her was not an easy thing at all.

The street they were coming up upon was brightly lit. It was still not too late and this street just happened to be the most bustling and crowded street in the city. There were two or three different tea houses and wine shops one this street along with all kinds of vendors on their sides, several of them were selling household appliances and cooking ingredients while several others were busy selling food such as fish porridge and roasted goose.

First Madame Gong Sun suddenly dove and landed in the middle of the street.

"Help! Help!" She immediately began screaming.

She ran into a tea house as she was screaming. Lu Xiao Feng followed

her closely. But a granny screaming for help with a strong young man chasing after her did not look good to people, nor would they stand for such a thing. There were already several angry looking young men shouting and screaming at him, some had even pulled out their knives. Lu Xiao Feng knew he was in trouble. Of course he could easily take care of these brave and righteous young fellows who were just trying to do what they thought was right, but these guys looked like they all could not wait to beat him to a pulp!

Seven or eight of them all of the sudden charged at him simultaneously, some waving sabres, others waving benches, as they surrounded Lu Xiao Feng.

“Mudaf’ka, wah’a’fa a yi ch’sin’ an o’d lade fo in da midl’o ni’? Ja wang ta rap’er?” They were screaming at him.

Lu Xiao Feng did not know whether to laugh or cry. He wanted to explain, but did not have the slightest clue as to how to even begin. He wanted to strike, but could not bring himself to do it. While he was hesitating, a bench came howling down from above. The thing he could do was reach up and block that it with his hand.

“Boom!” His hand was fine, but the bench had shattered. Every one of them were shocked into silence for a moment. It was at that moment that somebody suddenly rushed up and gave each of them a huge slap across their face. But incredibly, none of these angry and righteous young replied to the strike nor did they try and get out the way.

Lu Xiao Feng finally sighed in relief, he recognized this man as one of the two men in the yard outside of the Snake King’s pavilion that had tried to test him yesterday.

"Daya bastads no'ho thas as?" The man pointed at Lu Xiao Feng and said loudly. "Cha'sa Snake King'sa best frind an'sa da bas' goongfu 'nda wirl Luk Siu Fung!"

To these young men, the name Lu Xiao Feng did not mean much of anything, but the Snake King's friend was simply untouchable. So those with sabres in hand put up the sabres, those with a bench put them down as each and everyone of them walked up to Lu Xiao Feng and apologized! But Lu Xiao Feng had already taken the opportunity to charge out of that circle and through the back door. The back door led to a small alley. He had saw First Madame Gong Sun escape through this back door, but now there was only a homeless dog gnawing on a bone in the gutters. Not even a hint of a shadow of First Madame Gong Sun could be seen.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed and turned around, knowing that it was pointless to keep chasing now.

That big man had followed him here and walked up to him now.

"We werre juss goin' ta go look for ya in ta Wess Gard'n," with a smile, he told Lu Xiao Feng, trying very hard to not degenerate into his local dialect. "But i' turned ou' dat ya turned up 'ere instead!"

"Did something come up?"

The man nodded.

"We haf fund whirl dat lady is, she...." If there was one thing to be feared in the world it was Cantonese people trying to talk Mandarin. Having to stutter and stumble over and through his words, the man was already sweating bullets in frustration.

But Lu Xiao Feng was even more frustrated.

"Where is she?" He cut him off.

"I'll tak ya dare!"

The streets were still crowded, but upon seeing this big man come walking their way, the people all quietly and respectfully got out of the way.

"Ma saname is Luk too, I'm Luk Guang." He seemed to feel that it was an honor to have the surname of Lu as well.

But Lu Xiao Feng was only wishing that he would do less talking and more walking.

"I a'mire ya, your goongfu's realy da best." But Lu Guang was trying his hardest to make an good impression.

"Deese are great, wan' some?" He said as he reached into his shirt and took out a couple of sugar roasted chestnuts, hot and delicious looking sugar roasted chestnuts!

But Lu Xiao Feng looked as if he had just seen a poisonous snake.

"Where did you get these?" He demanded as he grabbed Lu Guang's arm.

"I boot dem, o'course!" Lu Guang answered after getting over his momentary shock. "I neva took otha people's thin's for no reasin!"

"Where did you buy them? Where's the person that sold them to you?"

"Ova dare."

Following the direction that Lu Guang pointed at, there really was a chestnut selling vendor. A person was busy roasting a huge pot of them. Chestnuts were not rare by any means, there were tons of people selling them everywhere. Lu Xiao Feng breezed a sigh of relief, but his palms were already covered in a cold sweat.

Thinking back, he realized that the moment when he peeled off the shell of the chestnut back then could have very well been the most dangerous moment in his life. If he had put that chestnut in his mouth, he would not still be Lu Xiao Feng at this moment.

"A dead man is just that, a dead man. A corpse don't have any names." Even that moment when Ye Gu Cheng's sword threatened his chest was not as dangerous as that moment. He suddenly discovered that there were some advantages to being a romantic after all. Besides, at least now he has found where Xue Bing was.

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly felt very happy.

“So your name is Lu too huh? That’s great!” He smiled and patted Lu Guang’s shoulders. “When we have time, I’ll invite you to drink some tea with me.”

Drinking tea is the biggest hobby of Cantonese people, not eating is ok, but not drinking tea is unfathomable.

But unexpectedly, Lu Guang shook his head.

“I don’t drink tea, I only drink wine!”

Lu Xiao Feng laughed, laughed so loud and so hard that other people on the street turned and stared at him. But he did not care.

When he was happy, he wanted everyone in the world to know and be happy with him. By now, Lu Guang had already turned into an alley. This alley was between a bakery and a tailor. The alleyway was very narrow and not possible for two men to walk shoulder to shoulder. There were no doors on either side. It looked like a little space that the 2 shop keepers intentionally put there when they built their shops.

Maybe it was because the 2 shops did not get along, nobody wants have only a wall separating themselves from someone they do not like. But at the end of the alley, there was a small red door. The door was partially covered up. A man was standing in front of the door anxiously waiting. So anxious that he was incessantly rubbing his hands together.

As soon as he saw Lu Guang, the man walked up and whispered something into his ear. Lu Guang's expression immediately changed dramatically. He turned around to face Lu Xiao Feng with a very guilty smile on his face.

"It's 'ere. A... I can't ga in wid ya."

Why could he not go in? Could there be something frightening in this building as well?

Lu Xiao Feng had already charged in. He did not care what he might run into as long as he could find Xue Bing.

There was only two rooms in the yard, there were two people inside already. Neither one of them was Xue Bing. Both were men, one of them was Jin Jiu Ling. Lu Xiao Feng was quite surprised by this turn of events.

"What are you doing here? Where's Xue Bing?"

Jin Jiu Ling did not answer, instead he held out his hand - in his hand was a dress, a light and soft white dress. Xue Bing's dress. Of course Lu Xiao Feng recognized it, his expression had already changed. Xue Bing's dress is here, but she is not. This dress could not have possibly have gotten up and walked here and she could not have possibly took her dress off and walked out naked. Lu Xiao Feng suddenly felt weak in his knees. He fell back two steps before collapsing onto a chair. His stomach began acting up again.

Jin Jiu Ling's expression was very grave as well.

"You recognize this as Xue Bing's dress don't you?" Finally, he slowly asked.

Lu Xiao Feng nodded. When he had parted ways with Xue Bing, she was wearing this exact dress.

"If her dress is here, then she must have been here too!"

"Did you see her?" Lu Xiao Feng still held out a glimmer of hope.

But Jin Jiu Ling shook his head.

"When we got here, this place was deserted."

"How did you find this place?"

"We didn't find this place."

"The Snake King?"

This time Jin Jiu Ling nodded.

"He truly is a great friend, he truly gave it his all for this!"

Lu Xiao Feng did not reply. He was asking himself questions in his

heart.

"Did I give it my all for him?"

"Beginning this morning, all of the men under his command began searching for Xue Bing for you!"

They are very effective at finding someone, because they have already infiltrated every nook and cranny of this city, especially the tea houses, wine shops, inns, small vendors, even those little food selling carts. These are always the places where with the most varied people, and therefore, the best places to gather information.

They started combing through these places for information as to whether or not there have been any suspicious looking strangers recently. Everybody, no matter who, has to eat and drink. There were none in the hotels, so they inquire on whether or not there are empty rooms around that had been rented out to any suspicious strangers. With three thousand men in the city's underworld asking about the same thing, it was not long before something surfaced.

"Behind the Mai Family Bakery, there's a little small house. Three or four months ago, it was rented out to someone."

When questioned, the landlord had this to say.

"The person who rented the house was a very handsome looking gentry, and very generous one too as he just paid a years worth of rent up front. But ever since then, he never showed up back here again, so

that house had been kept empty this entire time. Seems like nobody has been in it at all."

Nobody in this world would go through the trouble to rent a house and just leave it empty. Behind this there had to be a reason, a secret.

"When they found out about this at around dusk, someone was immediately dispatched to here. At that time there seemed to be some female groaning inside of here. The scout did not dare to do anything rash and went back for back up. However, when they got back there was nobody here."

"How do you know about this?"

Jin Jiu Ling smiled.

"Those brothers that worked with me back then are all famous and powerful now!" He patted the shoulder of the man at his side and smiled. "This here is the Head of the Bounty Hunters in this city, Lu Shao Hua."

Only now did Lu Xiao Feng took notice that standing at his side was short but strong, not that old but white haired man wearing a green shirt. Even though his get up was that of any normal person, his eyes glittered with power, his nose was hooked like an eagle's beak, and his waist was slightly protruding, indicating that besides wearing a soft whip or bent spear or some other sort of flexible weapon, he might have some chains and cuffs hidden underneath the shirt as well. Anybody who had spent just a few days in the martial world would recognize in an instant that he could be none other than one of the top masters of Six Doors, "Bald Eagle" Lu Shao Hua. The very same man recognized by the

underworld of the Southeast as the most effective and feared bounty hunter around.

“Even though I am a public servant and work for the government, I have always admired the Snake King. If possible, I would always be more than understanding with those under him!” Lu Shao Hua smiled and said. But in reality he knew full well that if he wanted to keep this city peaceful, it was best not to mess with the Snake King and his people.

“But when at the break of dawn when all 3000 of the Snake King’s men began mobilized without any of us knowing what was going on, I could not just sit idly by and watch as if nothing was happening.” So he also sent out the bounty hunters to gather information and find out what the fuss was all about. This city was the biggest city in the south, a place where the best and the worst of society meet and mingle. To be able to rise to the position as the Head of all bounty hunters at a place like this had to require someone quite special.

Lu Shao Hua continued. “When the information got back to me that this has something to do with the Great Hero Lu, then I immediately tried to find a way to get the information to Boss.”

Even though Jin Jiu Ling had long ago seized to be his boss, he still kept the habit of calling him that. Lu Xiao Feng now understood why Lu Guang did not want to enter this place earlier. With the Head of the bounty hunters in here, it would be best for them to avoid this place.

“Lady Xue’s dress is here, but yet she is not. There’s only one explanation!” said Jin Jiu Ling.

Lu Xiao Feng was listening. He trusted Jin Jiu Ling's analysis, but his heart was a mess once again.

"The person that kidnapped her here discovered that they have been found, so that person immediately took her away. But because that snow white dress of hers was too conspicuous, that person changed her out of it!"

"Are there clothes here to change into?" Lu Shao Hua opened up the dresser in corner of the room, there were six or seven different sets of outfits still inside of it, some for men, others for women, some meant for old people, others meant for young people.

"There is only one bed here and space enough for one person to live. Yet there are 6 or 7 completely different types of outfits here, this proves one thing." Jin Jiu Ling concluded.

"It proves that this person must be a master of disguise and at any given moment could appear as a number of different types of people!" Lu Xiao Feng finished his thought for him.

"But there are only clothes, no shoes. This also proves something!" Jin Jiu Ling continued.

"It proves that no matter what kind of person she disguises as, she wears the same shoes!" Lu Xiao Feng concluded.

"Red shoes?" Jin Jiu Ling inquired.

"Correct, red shoes, red shoes made from red silk, like the kind that newly wed brides wear during their wedding!"

"There are several clues that bears out that the handsome gentry that rented out this place was actually a female in disguise!" Jin Jiu Ling declared.

"Really?"

"This place is covered in dust, an obvious sign that nobody has lived here for a long time. The things that are needed for daily living is nowhere to be found either. But yet there is a mirror here!" Women do like looking at themselves in mirrors, but -

"Men also like to look at themselves in mirrors, and when putting on a disguise using a mirror is a must!" Lu Xiao Feng offered up a couple points of contention.

Jin Jiu Ling walked over to the desk sitting under the window and picked up the mirror.

"There is a hand print left on here," he said. "It was left there very recently too."

"A woman's hand print?" Lu Xiao Feng asked.

Jin Jiu Ling nodded.

"But it could not be Xue Bing's. She was locked up in here. Even if her hands weren't tied, at least her pressure point would have been sealed." The blanket and the bed sheet were a mess, as if somebody had just slept in bed.

"If my guess is correct, then she could have been lying in this bed the entire time." Jin Jiu Ling concluded.

"The Snake King's man reported that he heard female groanings so my guess is that Lady Xue must have also been injured as well!" Lu Shao Hua's comment earned him an angry glare from Jin Jiu Ling. He did not want Lu Xiao Feng to know that fact, he did not want Lu Xiao Feng to be too wracked with worry.

"Even if he didn't say it, I would have guessed at least as much!" sighed Lu Xiao Feng.

"But there's not a trace of blood anywhere in this room." Jin Jiu Ling immediately followed up. "So whatever her injuries might be, they are not serious!"

Those words were entirely to console Lu Xiao Feng. If the injuries that Xue Bing suffered were internal, then no matter how severe the injuries were, she would not leave any trace of blood either. But nevertheless, Lu Xiao Feng liked hearing those words, he needed to be consoled at this moment.

"Obviously, this person took Xue Bing and left in a hurry, that's why there are clues left here!" Jin Jiu Ling continued.

"When did she leave?"

"Before dark!"

At that time Lu Xiao Feng was on his way to the WestGarden for his appointment. That chestnut selling "granny" had yet to appear. She could have very well left with Xue Bing and then went to the WestGarden. She was quite likely to be the person who rented this place.

"This place was rented out 2 months ago," Jin Jiu Ling added. "To be precise, the date was the 11th of May."

"May 11th?" Lu Xiao Feng's expression changed at that fact.

"The robbery inside the RoyalPalace took place on the 11th of June. The day that she rented this place was exactly one month before then."

"And also just 3 days before Jiang Chong Wei's birthday!" Lu Xiao Feng added.

"What does Jiang Chong Wei's birhtday have to do with this?"

"On his birthday, Jiang Qing Xia had paid him a visit to wish him happy birthday."

"And it was on that day that she made an imprint of the key to the wine cellar." Jin Jiu Ling's eyes were flickering.

"To avoid people's suspicion that she might have something to do with this, they waited another 20 days or so before making their move!"

"To pull off such a huge heist, a great amount of planning is required, not to mention somehow finding out the details about the security and the layout of the Royal Palace. Only then could it be pulled off with any chance of success."

"Of course, she could not appear as a big bearded man all the time. So she must have planned to go to a remote place to get into her disguise that night." Lu Xiao Feng concluded.

"And this is the perfect place for it!" Jin Jiu Ling agreed.

"Because this place is in the middle of the busiest and most chaotic section of the city, nobody would be suspicious!"

"Looks like she's quite adept at taking advantages of other people's mistaken assumptions!" sighed Jin Jiu Ling.

Lu Shao Hua had been quietly listening to this entire exchange. But now he could not keep quiet anymore.

"Could the person who came to rent this place be that Embroidery Bandit?"

"Even though we can't be sure at the moment, I say that we are at least 60 or 70% sure of it!" Lu Xiao Feng replied.

"More than 70% sure!" Jin Jiu Ling suddenly refuted.

"Really?"

"I would venture to say that we are at least 90%, if not more, sure of it at the moment!"

"What makes you so certain of this?"

"Because of this!" Jin Jiu Ling took out a small red silk purse. "I found this in the dresser over there earlier. Take a look what's inside!"

Inside the purse was none other than a brand new pack of sewing needles!

From the Mai Family Bakery at the head of the alley, Lu Shao Hua bought several fresh out of the oven moon cakes. It was still a full month until the Mid-Autumn's Festival, and yet moon cakes were already going on the market. Lu Xiao Feng forced himself to eat half of one. This particular street was very quiet. They walked as they ate - the Embroidery Banbit was obviously never going to return to that place again, so there was no point to them staying there a moment longer.

"These needles are all made of the finest iron and smoldered over 100 times, these are no ordinary needles!" observed Jin Jiu Ling.

"Are the tips dipped in poison?"

"No." answered Jin Jiu Ling. "She left those men alive maybe for the sole purpose of proving that she was not a woman but a man with a huge beard and could embroider."

And she did not need to kill them to begin with!"

"Do you think that she could be Jiang Qing Xia?"

"No, not possible!" Lu Xiao Feng replied. "Jiang Qing Xia's martial arts is not weak, but compared to her, she's not even close!"

He continued. "Jiang Qing Xia's sole job was just to scout out the layout of the Royal Palace and to make a copy of the key for her!"

"You think that Jiang Qing Xia is under her command?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"Jiang Qing Xia is a quite famous person in the martial world, and notoriously proud, how could she willingly serve as someone's underling?" Jin Jiu Ling wondered.

"Because she's much better than Jiang Qing Xia in everything." sighed Lu Xiao Feng. "Never in my life have I seen a woman with that amazing level of martial arts and cunning!"

"You've seen her?" Jin Jiu Ling was shocked at this news.

"Not only seen her, but almost got killed by her!" Lu Xiao Feng smiled miserably.

"How did you meet her?"

"I was going to fulfill an appointment for a friend in the WestGarden!"

"Appointment? What kind of appointment?"

"A life taking appointment!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed tiredly.

"Who did your friend make an appointment with?"

"First Madame Gong Sun, Gong Sun Lan."

"I don't think I have heard of that name before." Jin Jiu Ling frowned.

"That's because she's not a famous person to begin with, and never want to either!"

"What kind of person is she?"

"Don't know."

"If you have already seen her, then how can you not know what kind of person she is?" Jin Jiu Ling was getting more puzzled.

"I only saw a chestnut selling granny and bought two catties of sugar roasted chestnuts from her. If I had eaten one of them, then you would not be talking to me at this moment."

"Grandma Xiong's sugar roasted chestnuts!" Jin Jiu Ling almost yelled.

"Grandma Xiong's sugar roasted chestnuts?" Lu Xiao Feng did not understand the meaning of the phrase!"

"Two years ago, there were often people dying on the road." Jin Jiu Ling explained. "They were all poisoned to death and by their bodies were always scattered some sugar roasted chestnuts."

"And all of the incidents took place during the night of the full moon." Lu Shao Hua knew about this as well.

"It was a full moon tonight," observed Lu Xiao Feng.

"I had been assigned to a couple of these cases previously, but I could never find any clues or leads," Lu Shao Hua explained some more. "Those who died were not killed by some mortal enemies seeking revenge nor were they killed for money."

"But precisely because those who died were mostly unknown nobodies,

these incidents did not make big waves in the martial world." Jin Jiu Ling added some more explanation. "Only those who worked in the public service new about it."

"Two years ago, there was a Escort named Zhang Fang who had just gotten into the business, he died like this too." said Lu Shao Hua. "But before he died he said two sentences."

"What did he say?"

"His first sentence was: 'Grandma Xiong's sugar roasted chestnuts.' We asked him who Grandma Xiong was? Why did she poison him? He answered: 'Because every full moon, she feels like killing'"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"So not only is she the Female Butcher, the Peach Flower Wasp, and Lady Five Poison, but Grandma Xiong as well!"

"Do you think the Embroidery Bandit is also her?"

"I was not sure originally, but several things taken together has pretty much proven that she is the Embroidery Bandit!"

"What things?"

"I had chased her all the way until the street of the Mai Family Bakery before I lost her, now I understand why she ran off in this direction."

"Because she had lived on that street before and was more familiar with its surroundings than you were!"

"Besides, those outfits in the dresser matched her stature. From her voice, it's safe to say that she was not old, so she could be very easily disguised as a handsome young gentry!"

But those were not the most important points!

Lu Xiao Feng continued. "Even though she was disguised as an old granny, she still wore a pair of red shoes - bright red silk shoes. Rumors say that on them are sewn an owl."

"Well, no matter what, at least we know now who that Embroidery Bandit is!" Jin Jiu Ling sighed.

"Pity we can't find her though, we don't even have any clue on where to start!" observed Lu Shao Hua.

"We do." Lu Xiao Feng suddenly said.

"We have a clue?"

"Not only do we have a clue, we have more than one!" Lu Xiao Feng continued. "Number one, we know that Jiang Qing Xia know her. Number two, since there's a headquarter for her heist here, then there must also be headquarter for her other heists as well!"

"That's right!" Jin Jiu Ling's eyes lit up. "No matter what, a master criminal would always have some special habit of his own. That is very hard for them to change out of."

"That's why I think that she must have a headquarter in Nan Hai!" Nan Hai was where Hua Yu Gan was.

Lu Shao Hua's eyes lit up as well. "The Head of bounty hunters in Nan Hai is MengWei. He's also served under Boss Jin back then. I can ask him to start searching for it right now. Maybe by the time you guys get there they would have already found it!"

"You can ask him to start right now?"

"We have always maintain some sort of communication all these years," Lu Shao Hua nodded. "And we communicat using the fastest way too!"

"Which way is that?"

"Pigeons."

"Maybe she's planning to take Xue Bing there, if we hurry up, we might be able to catch here there!" said Jin Jiu Ling.

"I'll specifically ask MengWei to be extra careful and quiet when conducting his search so as to avoid alarming her!"

"Are you going to write that letter now?" Jin Jiu Ling asked.

"Yes."

He had just began to quicken his steps when Jin Jiu Ling suddenly called him back.

"One more thing!"

Lu Shao Hua stopped and waited for his instructions.

"How much kick back silver do you get every month from the Snake King's men?" Jin Jiu Ling asked, smiling.

Lu Shao Hua blushed, but was still afraid to tell the truth.

"Eight hundred taels, but that's split for all of us!"

"Do you know that the Snake King is Lu Xiao Feng's friend?" Jin Jiu Ling's face darkened. "Do you know that Lu Xiao Feng's friend is also Jin Jiu Ling's friend?"

"I know," Lu Shao Hua's head dipped even lower. "I'll stop collecting those silvers tomorrow."

"Good, from tomorrow forth, I'll make up for that particular loss in your revenue!" Jin Jiu Ling smiled.

Lu Shao Hua looked at him with eyes overflowing with gratitude. With a deep bow, he left without saying another word, and without needing to say another word.

Lu Xiao Feng watched him leave, then suddenly sighed.

"Now I know why other people say you are the Number One guy in the 300 year history of Six Doors!"

"Why?" Jin Jiu Ling smiled.

"Because not only are you good at buying other people's hearts, you are good at selling out your friends!"

"Who have I sold out?" Jin Jiu Ling's smiled looked a little forced now.

"Me!" Lu Xiao Feng smiled tiredly. "If it wasn't for you dragging me into this mess, I wouldn't nearly have this much worry and this much headache!"

"But soon you'll be able to give that headache of yours to somebody else!"

"Who?"

"The Embroidery Thief," Jin Jiu Ling smiled and slowly added. "First Madame Gong Sun."

"Should we start on that right now?" Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"Of course right now, everything else will have to be set aside at the moment."

"But there's still something I can't sit aside!"

"What?"

"Friendship."

"I knew you are going to have to go see the Snake King again," Jin Jiu Ling sighed. "But I wonder if he's willing to find a friend in me?"

The Snake King was not willing. Because he could no longer make any more friends. How could a dead person make friends?

The little building was absolutely silent, not a light was lit. The men stationed in the yard had all been sent out, only four men were left to stand guard. They were puzzled, but none of them dared to go in and take a look. Without permission from the Snake King, nobody dared to go upstairs. But of course, Lu Xiao Feng was an exception.

"He did not sleep last night, maybe he has finally slept now."

The door was not fully closed. Lu Xiao Feng pushed it open. Jin Jiu Ling handed him his fire stick for light. The stick was just lit for an instant

before it went out again and fell. Lu Xiao Feng's hands were frozen stiff, so stiff that he could not even hold the fire stick in his hand.

In that brief instant, he had saw the Snake King's eyes, eyes that were almost popping out of their sockets. He was choked to death on that soft chair of his, choked to death by a bright red silken sash. The kind of silk sash that First Madame Gong Sun had tied to her daggers.

Lu Xiao Feng walked over and took the Snake King's hand in his. His entire body began shaking. The Snake King's hands were colder than his, rigis mortis had already set in on them. The room was covered in complete darkness. Jin Jiu Ling did not lit the light again either, he knew that Lu Xiao Feng could not bear to look at the Snake King's face again. Nor could he find any words to console Lu Xiao Feng. Deathlike darkness, deathlike silence, deathlike loneliness, only under these circumstances can a person truly feel and understand how real and frightening "death" is.

What seemed like forever went by.

"Let's go, let's leave right now." Lu Xiao Feng suddenly said.

"Yes!"

"But I'm not going to give my headache to her."

He suddenly laughed, a laugh that was filled with a kind of indescribable pain and fury.

Luckily for Jin Jiu Ling he did not light up lanterns because the expression on Lu Xiao Feng's face was one that he could possibly bear to see.

All he heard was Lu Xiao Feng emphasizing every single one of his words as he spoke.

"I'll make sure that she'll never have a headache again."

Jin Jiu Ling understood what he meant. When a person's head have been cut off, only then would that person never have a headache again!

Chapter 7 - Unwavering Persistence

Lu Xiao Feng did not want to ride carriages, but nevertheless he was on a carriage at the moment. People just can not avoid doing some things that they rather not do. "You have to find some way to get some sleep on the carriage, so when you run into First Madame Gong Sun you are in the condition to challenge her!"

Even Lu Xiao Feng knew that Jin Jiu Ling's words were right. But how could he sleep at a time like this?

"The little Prince has taken a real admiration to Hua Man Lou and has insisted that he stay at the Palace for several days. He's fully taken care of inside the Palace, don't you worry about him anymore."

Lu Xiao Feng knew better than anyone that he had no need to worry about things or people inside the Royal Palace, nor did he have to worry about the Snake King either. The person that he should be worried about at the moment is none other than himself. No matter how strong a person is, when confronted and weighted down with this much burden and pressure, that person would be hard pressed not to explode, or implode. The horse was pulling the carriage at a very quick pace, and the carriage was bouncing up and down.

He was trying with all his might to concentrate, there were just too many things that he had to concentrate and figure them out. But even if heart felt as if it had been torn into pieces.

At day break, the carriage stopped in front of a little tofu shop at a village on the side of the road. The sweet smell of hot tofu milk permeated through the carriage with the gentle morning breeze.

"I know you don't feel like eating anything, but you should at least drink a little bit of this hot tofu milk." Although Lu Xiao Feng did not want to waste any time, he knew better than to not be grateful to the concerns of his friend. Besides, the carriage driver and the carriage pulling horses all needed a little rest.

The lanterns were still lit inside of the shop. A person was squatting in the corner and loudly gulping down the huge bowl of tofu milk in his hand. The lantern light flickered and shone on his head, his completely bald head. He was a monk. This monk had a square face and huge ears, a face that predicts great luck as any fortune-teller would tell you. But the clothes on him were dirty and torn, and that pair of straw sandals on his feet was almost completely worn to nothing. Honest Monk!

Only when he saw possibly the world's weirdest monk did a smile appear on Lu Xiao Feng's face.

"Honest Monk, have you done anything not so honest recently?"

The Honest Monk looked genuinely surprised upon seeing him and almost spilled the tofu milk in his hand.

"Well, from the look of you, I know for a fact that you must have been up to no good last night!" Lu Xiao Feng laughed heartily. "Why else do you look so guilty when you saw me?"

"Honest Monk has only done something not honest once in his life," the Honest Monk's face looked like he had just swallowed a rat. "Buddha have mercy, why must Monk keep running into you?"

"What's so bad about running into me? At least I could pay for your bowl of tofu milk for you!" Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"Monks don't need to pay to drink tofu milk. Monks know how to beg for alms." He quickly gulped down the last bit of his tofu milk and looked as if he was about to scuttle out of there.

But Lu Xiao Feng blocked his way.

"Well, since you don't need me to pay for you, then why don't you stay and chat for a while? Ou Yang Qing isn't here, what are you in a hurry to leave for?"

"Gentry runs into soldiers, futile to talk logic," the Honest Monk meekly smiled. "Monk run into Lu Xiao Feng, much more unlucky than gentry. Chat this chat that, in the end Monk suffers!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"If Monk doesn't suffer, then how come the last time Monk ended up crawling on the ground?"

"Alright, I'll guarantee you won't be crawling today!" Lu Xiao Feng laughed despite of himself.

"Could still suffer even without crawling," the Honest Monk sighed. "Monk is only scared to two people in this world, why must Monk run into you again today?"

"Who's the other person?"

"Even if Monk tell you who that person is, you won't know!"

"Try me!"

The Honest Monk hesitated a while before finally giving in.

"This person is a female!"

"Monk seems to know quite a number of females!" Lu Xiao Feng joked.

"Quite a number a females know Monk too."

"Is this woman Ou Yang?"

"Not Ou Yang, Gong Sun!"

"Gong Sun?" Lu Xiao Feng almost shouted. "Is it First Madame Gong Sun?"

"You know about her too? How did you find out about her?" The Honest Monk was shocked too.

"You know her?" Lu Xiao Feng was shouting now. "Do you know where she is?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I have some unfinished business with her!"

The Honest Monk stared at Lu Xiao Feng for a while, and then burst into a fit of laughter. He was laughing so hard that he doubled over. Suddenly, he scuttled by Lu Xiao Feng's side and ended up almost 10 meters away. Even 10 meters away, he was still laughing.

But this time Lu Xiao Feng had made up his mind not to let him get away. He did a somersault and blocked his way again.

"Why are you laughing?"

"When Monk find something funny, Monk laughs. Monk has always been honest."

"What's so funny about this matter?"

"Why must you smash the pot and ask to the end?"

"Even if I have to smash a monk's head open, I'm going to ask this thing to the end."

He was very serious when he spoke. All the Honest Monk could do was sigh.

"Monk's head can't be smashed open, Monk only has one head."

"Then speak, why is this so funny?"

"Number one: because you are not going to find her. Number two: because even if you find her, you won't beat her. Number three, because even if you beat her, it'll be useless."

"How come?"

"Because as soon as you see her, you won't be able to bring yourself to hit her. By then you are probably hoping that she would hit you a couple of times!"

"She's very pretty?"

"There are four Great Beauties in the martial world, you probably know them all don't you?"

"Yes I do."

"Do you think they are beautiful?"

"Of course Beauties are beautiful."

"But First Madame Gong Sun is 10 times prettier than all four of them put together!"

"You've seen her?"

"Buddha have mercy," sighed Honest Monk as he smiled miserably. "Please don't let Monk see her again. Otherwise even if Monk has 10 heads Monk would still lose them all."

"Do you know where she is?"

"Don't know." When Honest Monk says he does not know, then he does not know. Honest Monk never lies.

"Where did you see her last time?"

"Can't tell you." When Honest Monk says he cannot tell you, then he cannot tell you. Even if you smash his head open, he still cannot tell you.

Even Lu Xiao Feng knew that there was no way to get him to talk. All he could do was angrily glare at him for a moment. Suddenly he laughed.

"Actually, Monk don't just only have one head."

Honest Monk did not understand.

“Because Monk still have a Little Monk!”

He laughed, laughed so hard that he doubled over. The Honest Monk was so angry that he could not even think of anything to say. He knew that Lu Xiao Feng was teasing him on purpose, but yet he still could not help but get mad, so mad that he almost fainted. Jin Jiu Ling was looking on from the side, even he could not help but laugh a little.

“Monk don’t tell lies and still have one more thing to tell you.” The Honest Monk suddenly sighed.

“Well? What is it?” Lu Xiao Feng asked, but only after some immense efforts to stop his fits of laughter.

“From the looks of the two of you, your faces are just covered with bad omens. With in three days, your heads will be smashed open by someone!”

Even though Meng Wei only has one head as well, he was known as “Three Headed Snake”. Among the Nine Famed Bounty Hunters, he was always known as the most ruthless one in his methods and the most merciless one in handing out judgements. Three Headed Snake, of course, had three different faces. When he saw Jin Jiu Ling, not only was his demeanor of the utmost respect, his smile was very dear and genuine.

Even Lu Xiao Feng was finding it hard that a person like this would often pour salted water or beat a person to a pulp in dark rooms.

But precisely because there was people like him in this world, everybody should know that it was best not to commit crimes during one's life. The driver that steered the carriage was also a man under the command of Lu Shao Hua. As soon as they entered the city there was someone from the local bounty group to greet them and lead them to this place. This was also the busy section of town - turns out most people really do find it hard to kick this kind of habit.

That is why there are so few truly unsolved crimes and mysteries in this world. Meng Wei had been waiting for them in a tea house on the corner of a street. Their final destination was a small alley way just in the back, at the very back of the alley way was a small little house.

"The person who rented this house was also a very handsome gentry, and also paid a year of rent up front."

"Have anybody noticed anything about this house after that?"

"No, seems like nobody has lived in there since the rental."

-Maybe they arrived before First Madame Gong Sun. After all, after killing the Snake King, she must have stalled a bit of time. Not to mention that she also had an injured Xue Bing with her.

That was why Jin Jiu Ling instructed: "Order those easy to spot men of yours to go away so that nobody notices that special attention is being

paid to this place!"

"We have been extra careful this entire time," Meng Wei assured them. "The only men that has been here have all been very well disguised."

"Is disguises enough?" Jin Jiu Link coldly snickered. "It's not like nobody can't see through the disguises."

Even Lu Xiao Feng was able to spot in an instant that the waiters in the tea house, the berry selling vendor across the street from the alley, that fortune-teller beside them, and 7 or 8 different customers inside the tea house were all disguised bounty hunters. After a prolonged stay in public service, it is hard to retain the same demeanor and actions as those of a normal person, especially one's expressions, which is almost impossible not to spot for those who are looking.

"I'll tell them to leave now." Meng Wei conceded.

Underneath the little corner of the roof that jutted out over the alley, there was a bald, scab covered beggar with a broken roof tile in hand. When Meng Wei walked by, he actually stuck the roof tile out in the way, begging for money. What he got instead was a kick.

In an instant all those disguised bounty hunters left.

"I only left two men here," reported Meng Wei. "That way should anything happen they could be used as messengers."

One was the vendor cross the street from the alley. The little vendor

display was left as it was, but the vendor was switched to someone not nearly as conspicuous. But who was the other one?

"Song Hong has been getting much better recently," Jin Jin Ling looked over at the bald beggar. "Take special care of him, he'll be a good one in the future."

Lu Xiao Feng finally understood, that scab covered beggar was one of them too. It was not yet 9 O'clock, the dog days of July were always a little longer, so there was no need to lit the lamps inside the houses. The setting sun shone in through the window to reveal a room covered in a layer of dust. It really did look like nobody had been inside of here in a long time. The set up and look of the room was very similar to the last one.

Inside the dresser was 8 or 9 different sets of outfits, there was a mirror on the desk, and besides the desk was a little bed. There was nothing interesting of note, and hence no clue to be found either. It was as if this whole trip was a waste of time. Jin Jiu Ling had his hands behind his back as he meander around the place. Suddenly, with a quick hop, he jumped onto the roof beam, shook his head, and jump back down.

"Over here!" Meng Wei suddenly shouted from teh kitchen. When he ran out, he had a little wooden box in his hand.

"Where did you find this?" Jin Jiu Ling was ecstatic.

"Inside the furnace." That is truly a great place to hide something, for something to be hidden there, there must be a secret.

Jin Jiu Ling looked ready to crack the box open for a look see. But Lu Xiao Feng stopped him.

"Careful, there might be some booby trap inside of it."

Jin Jiu Ling tested the weight of the box a little and smiled.

"This box is really light, if there are any springs or booby traps inside, it should be very heavy."

Of course, he was a very prudent man, or else he would have already died twenty times over about 10 years ago. Lu Xiao Feng did not say anything more. Springs and booby traps were made of metal, which would cause a huge difference in weight. There was no locks on the box, so Jin Jiu Ling easily opened it up. Suddenly, a burst of pink smoke shot out from inside the box. Jin Jiu Ling tried to hold his breath, but it was no in time. His entire body was propelled backwards and crashed into the dresser. He collapsed onto the ground!

There were no mechanical booby traps inside the box, but there was a little balloon made of fish stomachs. As soon as the box opened, the needles on the lid of the box would pop the balloon and immediately release the poison that had been stored inside the balloon. Jin Jiu Ling, despite all his precautions and experience, could not have suspected this.

There, laying on the floor, he looked just like a popped balloon. His entire body went limp, his complexion was frighteningly pale, and there was a cut on his head. He had banged his head against the dresser just a moment ago and opened a cut on his head.

-Your faces are just covered with bad omens. Within three days, your heads will be smashed open by someone. Honest Monk was being honest after all. Lu Xiao Feng had already taken a deep breath and dispersed the poisonous gas with his palm wind. Thinking back to Honest Monk's words, his heart suddenly felt a bit cold. Meng Wei had run out of the room as soon as he could, only after the gas had dispersed did he walk back in, grabbing his nose.

By now Lu Xiao Feng had helped Jin Jiu Ling sit up and was protecting his heart with his internal energy, hoping to somehow save his life.

Instead, Meng Wei went over and picked the box up, he seemed more interested in the box than Jin Jiu Ling. But the box was empty, there was nothing inside. After a prolonged inspection, he suddenly shouted.

"Here it is!"

The secret was not inside the box, but on the lid of the box. If carefully inspected, one could see that among the carvings on the lid, there were ancient inscriptions, the kind that dated back to before the time of the First Emperor. There were 6 words in total.

"Leave to Ah-Tu, will return soon."

The more obvious, the less attention people pay, the harder it is to find. First Madame Gong Sun really did understand how people's minds functioned. Who could have thought of communicating using this method? - She was telling someone to give something to Ah-Tu, because Ah-Tu was about to go back soon.

But who was the instructions meant for? What was supposed to be left to Ah-Tu? Who is Ah-Tu? These question were impossible to answer at the moment.

"Ah-Tu, Ah-Tu...." Meng Wei frowned and mumbled to himself. "Could it be that Ah-Tu?"

"You know of an Ah-Tu?" Lu Xiao Feng asked, even though he knew the answer.

"There was a beggar that was at the head of the alley, everyone called him Ah-Tu."

"Where is he now?"

"In order for Song Hong to stay there disguised as him there, we chased him away."

"Quick, go find him."

Meng Wei immediately began to leave.

"Wait a minute."

Meng Wei waited for him.

"Does he know why you chased him away?"

"I only told him that he's not allowed to beg there." Meng Wei shook his head. A bounty hunter never needed any reason to chase away a beggar anyways.

"Once you find him, immediately come and tell me, no matter what don't let him find out."

"Yes sir, I'll come back as soon as I find him."

"Don't bother coming back here. I'm going to take Jin Jiu Ling to Shi Jing Mo's place. If you find anything, just go there instead!" Shi Jing Mo was the most famous doctor in this city, of course, Meng Wei knew this too.

"Also, get your men to find some dust and pour it over where we just were, make sure the dust look settled."

"Yes sir."

"And put this box back where you found it."

"Yes sir."

"Song Hong has to leave here too, get someone else to patrol the head of the alley. Also, it'll probably wise to put a man in the yard next door, he should also inform me immediately should anything suspicious happen!"

"Yes sir." Meng Wei stood there and looked at Lu Xiao Feng, as if he wanted to say something, but restrained himself.

But when he made it to the door, he gave in and turned around.

"If Great Hero Lu entered Six Doors, then the rest of us would all have to go back to carrying our babies." He said with a smile.

Lu Xiao Feng was quite proud of himself as well. His handling of this situation was truly quite remarkable. Even if Jin Jiu Ling was sober, he could not have handled it any better than he. Unfortunately, Lu Xiao Feng was not a deity, so there were things that even he could not have expected. Shi Jing Mo was not at home.

This doctor always carried himself very pompously and very rarely went to the patients' houses but instead had them come to him. But the master of Magnificent Jade Veranda was an exception.

The wounds to Ye Yi Fan's eyes have not completely healed yet, but he also had not recovered from the shock either as he endlessly mumbled the names of famous paintings that he lost. Why is it the richer the person, the harder it is for them to let these material things go? Could it be precisely because they cannot let go that they are rich?

There was no way to communicate the unexpected change to Meng Wei now, so all Lu Xiao Feng could do was wait in the outer guest hall of the Shi mansion. The strange thing was, for some reason his mind was

really clear now. Suddenly, a lot of things popped up in his mind, things that he had not thought about at all before.

While he was in deep thought, news from Meng Wei arrived.

"Ah-Tu is at his home."

"A beggar has a home?"

"A beggar is still a person, even dogs have their own little holes, nevermind a beggar."

But you would be charitable to call Ah-Tu's home a "hole". It was nothing more than a small, abandoned, brick enclosure that had half collapsed onto itself, creating a little room. Several bricks were punched out on all four sides, passing for windows. It was smack in the middle of the summer heat wave, so the squalid wooden board that were used to cover the "windows" were not nailed up yet. There was light inside.

"Is Ah-Tu still in there?"

"Yes, don't know where he got himself a flask of wine, but he's enjoying it all by himself in there."

"Has anyone talked to him at all?"

"No, but there was someone over there."

"What was that someone like?"

"A young fellow, with a hat with a red cherry on top, dressed like a dispatcher or baliff for an official or something."

Not long after this little exchange, a dispatcher with a red cherry hat came strolling pompously up the little dirt hill with a yellow cloth bag with him. After surveying the surrounding area for a while, he jumped into Ah-Tu's little house. Of course, he did not notice Lu Xiao Feng and Meng Wei, both of them were very well hidden on a particularly large tree.

"Should we go in and get them now?" Meng Wei whispered.

"The person we want to catch isn't him." Lu Xiao Feng immediately shook his head.

"You are planning to find that Embroidery Bandit from him?" Meng Wei immediately understood.

"Mmhmm."

"The inscription on the box said that he was going back, do you think he's going back to where First Madame Gong Sun is?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"And that bag must be something that someone wants to give to her,

she's probably already returned to her base now!"

Even Ah-Tu has one, nevermind First Madame Gong Sun. So Meng Wei had to restrain his impatience and wait. He did not have to wait long. That red cherry hat wearing dispatcher strolled out and, humming a little tune, walked back down the little dirt hill. He had done his job, so he looked much more relaxed.

After another long wait, the light from inside the little "house" suddenly went out with Ah-Tu walking out soon after. Before leaving, he made sure to nail close the entrance to his "house" with a door made of a rather large piece of wood. He carried two flax bags on his back with the yellow cloth bag obviously in one of them.

"I'll follow him, you go back and take care of your Boss Jin."

"You are going without backup, what if..."

"Don't worry, I can't die!" Lu Xiao Feng patted his shoulder.

The moon was still almost full as it shone brightly upon the world. The night breeze carried with it the tiniest hints of Autumn. This was the perfect weather for travel. Ah-Tu did not rent a carriage, nor did he get a horse, but instead, he was just carelessly walking out in front, as if he had not the slightest care in the world. There was nobody else traveling on this highway, only the two of them, one in front, the other behind. Sometimes, Ah-Tu would hum a tune or two, other times, he would bellow scenes from operas or stories out loud; overall, he seemed to be walking ever slower.

Lu Xiao Feng could barely restrain himself from going off to find a whip and give the guy a couple of lashes to hurry him up. After what seemed like forever, the stars were getting more sparse and the moon was about to set, but Ah-Tu still did not pick his pace up. Instead, he found a tree on the side of the road and sat down. He opened one of his bags, dug out half of a roasted duck, a flask of wine, and, remarkably, began to eat on the side of the road.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed, all he could do was find a tree very far away and climb onto it. He waited, and watched. Suddenly, he realized that he was starving. He had not had a decent meal for the last two days. Back then it was because he did not want to eat, but now he simply could not eat.

Ah-Tu tore off one of the legs of the duck and took a bite out of it, which he followed up by drinking some wine. Suddenly, he sighed as well.

"Man it's boring to just drink alone, if there was a person here with me, that would be great." He mumbled to himself.

Lu Xiao Feng was truly tempted to go and join him for a meal. But all he could do was watch him eat instead. Finally, Ah-Tu finished. He wiped his hands on his pants and was once again on his way. Lu Xiao Feng was pleasantly surprised to discover that, other than the leg that Ah-Tu tore off, the half of the roasted duck was basically untouched when Ah-Tu left it on the ground. This beggar seemed completely oblivious to the fact that he was a beggar.

Of course, he was not really a beggar, but Lu Xiao Feng felt as if he was about to die of starvation, he was very tempted to pick up that half of a duck and use it to fill up his stomach. But he had to restrain himself. When he thought about all those scabs that covered Ah-Tu's body, even if

he was really about to die of starvation, he would choose death instead of eating that duck.

More walking followed, and before he knew it, Lu Xiao Feng found that it was already day. The nights in the month of July are always relatively short as the sun suddenly rose. Slowly, but surely, more and more people on their way to make it to the city markets appeared on the road. Ah-Tu suddenly began to run as fast as he could on the road. A dirty beggar like him would never attract any attention on the road, whether if he was running or rolling.

But how could Lu Xiao Feng run after him like a wild dog as well? But what could he do besides running? Even if other people took him to be a lunatic, he still had to run. And Ah-Tu was running quite fast too.

When there were nobody else on the road, he walked slower than a snail, but when there were other people on the road, he was running faster than a rabbit. Lu Xiao Feng suddenly discovered that this man was not a easy person to deal with at all. To keep an eye on a person like this was not easy. Fortunately, Ah-Tu did not look back, and he also looked a bit tired as well. Suddenly, he hopped onto a back of a mule-pulled cart carrying discarded pig parts. He leaned up against the outside of the cart and looked like he was getting ready to take a nap.

The driver of the cart turned back and glared at him rather viciously, but did not chase him off. Lu Xiao Feng sighed as he made another discovery: traveling as a beggar has quite a number of advantages that other people could have never guessed.

No wonder there was the saying: "The pauper had it better than the prince."

The sun slowly rose to the top of the sky. Ah-Tu's eyes were closed as he looked like he really did fall asleep. Instead, Lu Xiao Feng was covered in sweat, he was roasting under the heat, exhausted, hungry, thirsty, and just could not stop no matter what.

To find First Madame Gong Sun, he had to follow this person no matter what. If he was lucky, he would have run into quite a number of vendors selling cold wine or beef rice on the side of the road. But luck was not on his side, there was not even pie vendor to be found.

Turns out that the people in the south are very particular about eating. To eat, they have to find a comfortable place to sit down and eat. Small vendors like those very rarely sell anything. So it is nearly impossible for small vendors like that to stay in business at all. So all Lu Xiao Feng could do was to bear it.

On the side of the road was fields after fields of irrigated farm land. Only now did the road curl around the base of a green mountain. Ah-Tu suddenly hopped off of the cart and began making his way up the mountainside. Under the shades of the trees and grass on the mountainside, it was at least quite a bit cooler. Ah-Tu, having taken a nap on the back of the cart, seemed to be full of energy.

Lu Xiao Feng had no other choice but to pick himself up as well. He suddenly discovered yet another thing, not only was this dirty and downtrodden beggar physically strong, but also seemed to know a bit of lightness skills. Lucky for him that mountain was not very tall, besides, if Ah-Tu was willing to run up the mountainside, may his destination was not that far off. After all, it was very likely for First Madame Gong Sun's secret headquarter to be on a mountain. But surprisingly, this mountain

was completely deserted, not only was there no buildings to be found on either side of the road, but the mountain roads themselves were very narrow and twisted.

Once at the peak, the air was suddenly filled with a delicious smell, a smell of stewed lamb. There must be a house there, must be First Madame Gong Sun's house. But surprisingly, Lu Xiao Feng was wrong again. There was no building at the top, but a whole group of beggars eating and drinking.

"Count yourself as lucky," someone said as they noticed Ah-Tu. "We had just stole ourself a fat lamb and was about to enjoy it ourselves. Since you showed up, why don't you join us?"

"Well, I must have done something right these last couple of days, no matter where I go I keep running into good stuff to eat!" Ah-Tu laughed as he walked up to them.

But Lu Xiao Feng was relegated to just staring once again. There was no way he could blend in with these beggars and eat that stolen lamb, nor could he allow himself to be seen by Ah-Tu. So all he could do was hide behind a rock, starving so bad that his belly began to hurt.

He was even beginning to feel a bit of regret, he should have picked up and ate that left over duck last night. Ah-Tu seemed to have warmed himself to those beggar almost instantly. They were laughing and feasting to their hearts content, as if they were in 7th Heaven, but Lu Xiao Feng felt as if he had found the deepest reaches of Hell. He had never before suffered anything remotely like this in his life.

Only now did he finally experience how frightening a thing starvation can be. If he could somehow use this little opportunity and catch a little shut eye, at least it would not be all bad.

But there might be other people under the command of First Madame Gong Sun among these beggars, they could have been waiting here to take over for Ah-Tu. So Lu Xiao Feng could not afford to relax for one moment, he had to concentrate on spying all of them. If Ah-Tu secretly handed that yellow bag off to another person to take to First Madame Gong Sun without him noticing, then would not all this suffering he was going through be in vain?

Finally, those beggars finished eating, Ah-Tu gave each and everyone of them a huge thanks before, incredibly, starting to make his way down the mountain. What was the purpose of this excursion to the top of this mountain?

"Could he have actually handed that yellow bag off to someone else? How come I didn't see it?" Lu Xiao Feng could not figure it out. But since he did not see anything, he had to keep following Ah-Tu.

Half way down the mountain, Ah-Tu suddenly stopped and dug out that yellow bag from one of the flax bags he was carrying. After carefully inspecting it over, he put it back into the bundles on his back.

"Lucky one of those lamb stealing thieves didn't steal it," he smiled and mumbled to himself. "Or else my head might not stay on my neck for too much longer!"

What was in that yellow bundle? Why was it so important? Lu Xiao Feng

could not see, nor could he guess.

No matter what, at least the thing was still with Ah-Tu. More over, if that thing was that important, then he might have to hand it over to First Madame Gong Sun himself. It looked as if all the suffering that Lu Xiao Feng was going through was not in vain after all.

But the worst thing of it all was that Ah-Tu actually went back down the mountain the same exact way he went up. He could not possibly have gone up the mountain just to eat some lamb could he? Could he have noticed that somebody was tailing him and was purposefully making him suffer a little? No, that could not be it either. He did not look nervous at all, and if he had noticed that someone was following him, he would not have gone back down the same way.

Lu Xiao Feng was even more confident that he could not have been discovered. Even if he starved for two more days, he would still not make any kind of sound at all.

Recently, quite a lot of people had come to the conclusion that his lightness kungfu was among the top 5 in the world.

“When a person is burden with any kind of secret and important job, no matter if there was someone following him or not, his movements would always be purposefully meandering.”

That must be why, Lu Xiao Feng seemed pretty satisfied with this explanation. After making his way down the mountain, Ah-Tu’s movements, as expected, did become much more stable. After another hour or so of walking, he entered a city. After wandering about the streets

of the city twice, he entered a restaurant, but then exited out of the back door. Suddenly, he turned and went down an alley way, there was only one door in the entire alley. It was a back door in a remote corner of a flower garden of a particularly large complex.

He looked as if he had just returned home as he casually walked in without even knocking. Once inside the yard, he seemed to be very familiar with the layout of the place as well. A couple of twists and turns and he had made his way through the flower bushes, over a small little bridge, and arrived at a small little pavilion sitting on the edge of a lotus pond. There was light on the upper floor of the pavilion. Only now did Lu Xiao Feng realize that it was past dusk again.

Past dusk, the setting sun could barely be seen above the horizon. The little pavilion was magnificently lit, but nobody could be heard, not even a servant of any kind. Ah-Tu did not hear either as he made his way upstairs. In a particularly ornate room upstairs, nobody could be seen, but a very expensive set of dishes and wines had been neatly laid out on a table.

"Looks like his luck really is quite something, everywhere he goes he has something good to eat."

Even though nobody was there, there was eight sets of chopsticks and wine cups laid out on the table. Ah-Tu sat down, picked up a pair of chopsticks, picked up a piece of "Drunken Chicken", but shook his head and put it back. He reached behind him and took out that yellow bundle yet again.

"Didn't expect me to be the first one here again." He mumbled. He was obviously waiting for people. But what kind of people was he waiting for?

Was First Madame Gong Sun among them?

Beside the pavilion was a huge, overshadowing ginkgo tree covered with leaves and branches, perfect for hiding. And it sat perfectly facing the window of that room.

Like a gecko, Lu Xiao Feng slid up the trunk of the tree facing away from the window and found a part of the tree that was particularly dense with leaves. It was getting dark, even if someone was looking straight out from the window, he would be perfectly safe. At least now that Ah-Tu had reached his destination, he did not have to worry about him pulling some trick anymore.

Lu Xiao Feng was just about to take a deep breath and rest up a while when he heard the faint sounds of clothing flapping in the wind. A shadow of a human being flashed by the the branches of the tree and landed in the pavilion with a pretty "Ingenius Flip Cloud"

"Pretty movements, very refined lightness kungfu too." Lu Xiao Feng immediately opened his eyes wide to take a look. But he already knew that this person was not First Madame Gong Sun. Even though this person's skills were top notch, it was still a notch below First Madame Gong Sun's, and, of course, his.

But this person was a woman too, she looked to be around 40, but she looked half that age. There was still a youthful exuberance and innocence about her, but her style that was hinted by that look from the corner of her eyes was far more seductive than anything a young girl could match. She wore on her a dark purple but form-fitting outfit with a yellow bundle in her hand as well.

Back then, just as she flew by the tree, Lu Xiao Feng had already noticed that she was wearing a pair of red shoes as well.

But now she had already sat down.

"You are first again." She gave Ah-Tu a sweet smile.

"Men are always on the short end of these things, we always end up having to wait for women." Ah-Tu sighed.

Now that was something that Lu Xiao Feng could very well relate to. He realized that he was right, this Ah-Tu was not an easy customer to deal with, and his position was not low either. How else could he, a scab covered beggar, be able to sit as an equal to this purple clothed woman with great lightness kungfu and a very refined style? Could he be a martial art master?

Lu Xiao Feng had fancied himself to be very knowledgeable when it comes to people and things in the martial world. But now he realized that there was still quite a lot of masters in this world that he did not know, at least these two sitting in front of him were people that he had never even seen before. The wind suddenly carried with it a wave of silver bell like laughter. The person had not arrived, but her laughter had.

"Seventh Sister is here." The purple clothed woman observed.

She did not even finish before there was one more person in the room. Of course, it was another female. She had her hair done in two ebony

black pony tails, her eyes glowed, her teeth shone, and her smile was sweet. She was a red clothed youth and had a yellow bundle in her hand as well.

She gave Ah-Tu a little smile and then turned toward the woman in purple.

"Second Madame, you are early!"

"The elderly are always on the short end of these things, we always wait for the young ones." sighed the woman in purple.

"Since when did you ever end up on the short end of things?" She laughed, it was as silver bells were ringing again. "Other people should count their blessings if they don't end up on the short end of anything you are involved with."

The woman in purple looked at her and sighed.

"I don't understand what are you laughing about? Why do you laugh all day and all night?"

"Because she thinks that she's very pretty when she laughs," Ah-Tu matter of factly answered. "Not to mention that pair of cute dimples, if she doesn't laugh, then how could anyone see them?"

The girl in red gave her an angry glare, but started to laugh again. And this time she could not stop herself either. Lu Xiao Feng now knew that the woman in purple was known as Second Madame. Second Madame?

Could it be short for Second Madame Gong Sun? If Second Madame Gong Sun was here, then surely First Madame Gong Sun could not be far behind. Lu Xiao Feng finally felt a bit of joy, at least all that suffering he went through was not for nothing. Besides, that girl in red's laughter was truly something that just makes people happy upon hearing it. Pity Lu Xiao Feng did not know her either.

"Let's have a wager," she was still laughing. "Who do you think will be the last to arrive this time?"

"Third Sister, of course," Second Madame replied. "She takes an hour just to wash her face, even if you burn her eye brows she would not hurry up one bit!"

"That's right!" The girl in red clapped her hands in excitement and laughed. "It must be her again this time."

"Wrong, it won't be her this time." Suddenly a voice objected from downstairs.

The voice was very gentle, and very slow, as a person slowly came walking upstairs. Even though she was walking slowly now, Lu Xiao Feng had not noticed her she entered the building.

The girl in red looked shocked to see her, but then she immediately laughed again.

"Who would have known that a miracle just happened? Third Madame is not late!"

Not only was her voice gentle, her demeanor was gentle as well, her smile even more gentle as she slowly walked up the stairs, slowly sat down, and slowly placed that yellow bundle of hers onto the table. Only then did she ever so lightly sigh.

"Not only was I not late this time, but I was here before all of you."

"Really?" The girl in red asked.

"I got here last night and slept downstairs. I had planned on coming up earlier and giving all of you a big shock!"

"So why did you wait until now to come up here?" The girl in red laughed.

"Because I had a lot of things that I needed to do!" Third Madame sighed.

"Like what?"

"I had to comb my hair, and then wash my face, and then put on my clothes, and then put on my shoes...." By this time, even Lu Xiao Feng, who was hanging off of a tree, had to laugh a little.

That girl in red had completely doubled over in laughter.

"These are truly some quite important things." She said, trying to catch

her breath.

"I told you, she takes a hour to wash her face." Even Second Madame could not help but laugh a little.

"I'm only puzzled by one thing!" Ah-Tu suddenly cut in.

"What one thing?" The girl in red asked, making sure she did before the other two.

"Other than combing her hair, washing her face, putting on her clothes and shoes, how does she have time to do anything else in a day?"

"This is truly a serious problem," the girl in red was trying her best to hold back her laughter and answer with a straight face. "If she ever gets married in the future, she might not even have time to have kids, that's quite serious indeed!"

But before she could finish, she was almost rolling on the floor with laughter.

"All I know is that you will certainly have time to have kids," Third Madame did not seem to be mad at all, instead, she just slowly replied. "In the future you will at least have 70 or 80 kids."

"Even if I have one a year, how could I have that many?" The girl in red was still laughing.

"If you have them in batches, then wouldn't you be able to?"

"Only pigs have batches after batches of little pigs, I'm not a...." The girl in red stopped in mid-sentence, she suddenly realized that she was basically making fun of herself.

Second Madame could not hold back her laugh either.

"Hehe, so you aren't a pig huh? Well, you should immediately declare this to everyone, so as to avoid confusion!" She joked.

"Oh I see how it is," the girl in red pouted. "Fourth Sister and Sixth Sister aren't here, so you are all taking this opportunity to make fun of me!"

"So how is it any different if they are here?" asked Third Madame.

"They would at least doing the talking for me, the two of you combined are no match for even one of them."

Another gust of wind blew by as three more people flew in from outside the window like birds.

"There is at least one thing I'm sure of, I know she's not a little pig!" One of them smiled and said.

The girl in red clapped her hands again in excitement and laughed.

"Did you hear that? I just knew that Fourth Sister would be on my side."

"But what is she if not a little pig?" Third Madame asked instead.

"She's just a little hen, that's all!" Fourth Sister answered.

"I'm a little hen?" The girl in red was taken aback by the answer.

"If you are not one, then why are you always going: 'gegegege', laughing nonstop day and night?"

The girl in red could not laugh anymore, neither could Lu Xiao Feng - Among these last 3 women, he actually knew two of them. One of them was, of course, Jiang Qing Xia, that did not surprise him. But even in his wildest dreams he could not have imagined that their "Fourth Sister" was Ou Yang Qing! That famed prostitute who he had once so angered, that only loved money but did not care for looks, that one and only Ou Yang Qing!

To see Ou Yang Qing together with Jiang Qing Xia, to see that Ou Yang Qing's lightness kungfu was not below Jiang Qing Xia's, Lu Xiao Feng had almost fallen off of his tree. This "Red Shoes" organization really did seem to have every kind of person. Ou Yang Qing and Jiang Qing Xia were obviously prominent figures of this organization. There were eight pairs of chopsticks on the table, and now seven people had arrived.

The woman in purple was Second Madame, that woman who took an hour to wash her face was Third Madame, Fourth Sister was Ou Yang Qing, Fifth Sister was Jiang Qing Xia, Sixth Sister was a white socksed,

green robed, and head completely shaved nun, and that little hen that never stops laughing was number seven. So where was First Madame? How come First Madame Gong Sun have yet to show up? And that scab covered Ah-Tu, what was his relationship to them? Where does he rank?

All seven of them had sat down and placed the yellow bundle in front of them. Only the head seat was still empty, obviously left for First Madame Gong Sun.

"So what did you six sisters bring back this time?" Ah-Tu suddenly said. "Can you let me see it?"

"Of course we can," the girl in red answered, again making sure she answered before the others. "Since Third Madame was here first, why don't we let her show us what she brought back first?"

Third Madame did not object nor refuse, instead, she slowly reached out and began to untie the knots on her bundle. She had made 3 knots, but it took her nearly 10 minutes to merely untie the first knot.

"You gals might be able to stand it, but I can't," the Second Madame sighed and meekly smiled. "Let me show you what I have first."

Now Lu Xiao Feng had his eyes wide open as he concentrated on the bundle. What was inside these mysterious yellow bundles? He had wanted to know a long time ago. So he was really more anxious to see its contents than anybody else present. Luckily for him, Second Madame's movements were not slow and it was not long before she had opened up her bundle. Inside it was 70 or 80 different sized bank deposit books.

"This year was not a very successful year for me, and I took 3 months off as well," she explained. "So I was only able to take in about one million eight hundred and eighty thousand taels of silver from the bank houses around. But next year I'm sure I'll be able to get twice as much."

In the span of one year, she was able to gather more than 1.8 million taels of silver, and still claim that it was a bad year? Lu Xiao Feng quietly sighed. He could not figure out for the life of him what business this Second Madame was involved in. From what he knew, the biggest and most powerful villains in the underworld were only able to take in about half as much as her. He could not think of any other business in this world that was more profitable than crime.

"If we only have a little more than 1.8 million taels, then I guess we'll have to curb our spending a bit this year." Third Madame sighed.

"How about you? How was your year?" Second Madame asked.

"It wasn't a bad year for me," Third Madame smiled. "There seem to be quite a number of people who don't want their noses recently."

Don't want their noses, meaning that they don't want their face, meaning that they are shameless. Lu Xiao Feng understood that sentence very well, but what did that have to do with her in take this year? That Lu Xiao Feng did not understand. Luckily, by this time Third Madame had finished untying those three knots on her bundle. Inside was a piece of oil cloth.

She unraveled that layer of oilcloth, only to reveal another layer of red satin. Unbelievably, inside that red satin, was 70 or 80 different sized and

different shaped noses! Human noses! Lu Xiao Feng almost fell out of his tree again. How could a woman so gentle and so polite that it would be difficult to imagine her killing an ant cut off 70 or 80 different noses with her own hands?

"Well, since they did not want their noses anymore, I decided to just simply cut their noses off for them!" Third Madame gently said.

"That is such a great idea!" The girl in red clapped her hands and laughed again.

"But next year I won't be doing this!"

"What are you planning to do next year?" inquired the girl in red.

"Next year I'll be cutting off tongues!"

"Cutting off tongues? How come?"

"Because recently I discovered that there are people in this world that talks way too much!" Third Madame lightly sighed and slowly explained.

"If I didn't know you, I would have not believed you were such a ruthless and mean person even if you beat me to death!" The girl in red stuck her tongue a little and laughed like a silver bell.

"I won't kill you, the most I would do is cut off that tongue of yours!" Third Madame casually replied.

The girl in red immediately retracted her tongue and shut her mouth, as if she was afraid to even let people see it. When it came to cutting off noses or cutting off tongues, this woman, who took an whole hour to wash her face, would not be slow.

"Who does the biggest nose in here belong to?" Ou Yang Qing suddenly asked.

Why do you want to know?"

"I'm always very interested in those men with big noses!" Ou Yang Qing joked.

"That little girl has been spending too much time in that kind of places," Second Madame laughed as she admonished her jokingly. "Two years in that place and not only is her heart blacker now, her skin is thicker too."

"Second Sister must be an insider as well," Ou Yang Qing giggled. "She seemed to know full well the good things about men with big noses!"

"Pity that the man with the biggest nose is a person with no nose now!" observed Third Madame.

"So who are you talking about?" Ou Yang Qing asked.

"Duan Tian Cheng!"

When he heard this name, Lu Xiao Feng was shocked again. He had heard of this name before, and met the person before as well. Not only was “QuellingThreeMountains” Duan Tian Cheng’s nose huge, his style was too, as was his backing. Cutting off his nose, no matter by whom, was definitely not an easy thing to do.

“Are we still planning to do the same thing as in the past?” The girl in red had kept her mouth shut for a long time and could not restrain herself anymore. “All of us drinking and eating and getting drunk to our hearts content?”

“That is our tradition, of course it won’t change.” answered Second Madame.

“Well then, since we are all here, why haven’t we started?” The girl in red asked.

Lu Xiao Feng’s heart sank. - They are all here? - Is First Madame Gong Sun not coming at all today?

“Who says that we are all here? Could you not see that there’s still a seat empty?” rebuked Second Madame.

“Who else is coming?”

“I heard that First Sister found you a younger sister!” Second Madame smiled.

“Finally, someone younger than me!” The girl in red smiled too. “From

now on, if any of you bully me around, I'll just go and bully her around!"

"Too bad she won't be here today!" Ah-Tu suddenly said.

"Why not? Does she not want to come?" Second Madame frowned.

"She wants to, but cant!"

"Someone won't allow her?" Second Madame asked.

Ah-Tu nodded.

"Well if she's not coming, then who are we waiting for?" The girl in red immediately cut in, anxious to get started.

"A guest!"

"We actually have a guest this year?" The girl in red's eyes lit up.

"Mmhmm!" answered Ah-Tu.

"How well does he hold his wine?" The girl in red asked.

"I hear he's not bad!"

"Well, no matter how well he holds his wine, as long as he dare to come

today, I guarantee that he will come in vertically, but leave horizontally!" The girl in red laughed.

"Looks like not only could he hold his wine, but he is pretty brave too," Second Madame's eyes flickered. "Or else he would have been scared away by that sentence of yours."

"He is not very brave?" The girl in red blinked.

"He has not ran away yet." Ah-Tu replied.

"Well if he has not ran away yet, then why doesn't he come in?" The girl in red laughed. "Could he possibly like the taste of wind better than the taste of wine?"

"He's already tasted a whole day of wind," Ah-Tu matter of factly answered. "I would say he's about had enough by now."

Someone sighed on the tree outside the window: "I really did have had enough."

As he sighed, Lu Xiao Feng floated in along with a gentle breeze. He had wanted to come in for a long time now.

Seven people like this, how could they not know that there was a person on the tree outside of the window? Lu Xiao Feng had suddenly discovered that hiding outside was really a very stupid thing for him to do. He felt that he was becoming more and more like an idiot.

But he did not look like an idiot. No idiot, no matter what kind of an idiot he is, would ever have four eyebrows.

The girl in red looked at him, she suddenly clapped her hands and laughed.

"I know who you are, you are that four eyebrowed idiot egg Lu Xiao Feng!"

Chapter 8 - Duel After Drinks

Starving for an entire day, tasting nothing but wind, was already a miserable thing. But the only thing more miserable than that is probably, while on the verge of passing out due to starvation, to be laughed at and called a big “idiot egg”.

But Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

“I know plenty of people call me ‘idiot egg’, but there’s plenty of people who likes to call me by another name!”

“What name is that?” The girl in red asked.

“Big rooster!”

The girl in red blushed, blushed so much that her face was red like her clothes.

“Actually, he has another, even better name.” Ou Yang Qing suddenly interrupted.

“What name is that?” The girl in red immediately asked again, desperate to change the subject.

“Three Eggs Lu.”

"Three Eggs Lu?" The girl in red was puzzled. "What does that mean?"

"Very simple really," Ou Yang Qing nonchalantly replied. "Because he's not only a big idiot egg, he's a bastard egg as well as a flat broke poor egg. Add it together, doesn't that equal three eggs?"

"Oh my that is such a great name!" The girl in red was, once again, doubled over in laughter. "I have never heard of a name as good as that in my life!"

"Well, since you are all so hungry, why don't you guys break those three eggs open and fry it for food?" Second Madame joined in the conversation as well with an unassuming smile.

"Because these three eggs aren't that fresh anymore," Ou Yang Qing replied. "They are rotten eggs as well."

"Now I'm only worried about one thing!" Third Madame sighed.

"What's that?" asked Ou Yang Qing.

"I'm worried that he's not a duck egg, but a chicken egg!"

"That is really a very serious problem," Ou Yang Qing nodded and replied with a straight face. "If he is a chicken egg, then a hen must have given birth to him, then isn't he the little hen's son?"

Even though the girl in red's face was even redder, she was completely and hopelessly doubled over with laughter. Lu Xiao Feng did not laugh, but he did realize two things.

-You cannot afford to mess with women, especially women like Ou Yang Qing.

-A man arguing with six women would be like a gentry trying to talk logic with six soldiers, he might as well buy a huge piece of tofu and smash himself to death with it. He had already made one mistake, so he did not want to make a second one. The girl in red was still laughing. Not only was her laughter pleasing to the ear, it somewhat infectious. Whenever anybody hears the sound of her laughter, their heart would inevitably be filled with joy, and it would make them laugh along for a little. But Lu Xiao Feng did not laugh. He suddenly lunged forward and, quick as a flash, grabbed the girl in red's arm and twisted it behind her.

"Watch out!" The Second Madame shouted.

As soon as those two words came out of her mouth, the girl in red threw her other elbow back towards Lu Xiao Feng's ribs, along with three other types of weapons from both sides.

Their actions were fast, especially that green robed, white socked nun. A quick flash in her palms and a dagger was already flying towards him, its cold and sinister aura was so dense that it was hard for one to keep his eyes open. But too bad that Lu Xiao Feng was even faster, his chest and belly caved in slightly as both of his hands grabbed tightly onto the girl in red's arm. The three weapons were flew out at the same time, and they stopped at the same time as well, their blades were no more than 10 centimeters away from the fatal points just under Lu Xiao Feng's ribs.

But Lu Xiao Feng did not move, in fact, he did not even blink. Because he knew that those moves would never have continued on their ways. If his brother had fell into an enemy's hands, he would not dare to be so imprudent in his actions either. The veins were bulging on the hand that the green clothed nun used to hold her sword. To pull a move like that to a completely stop uses up tremendously more energy than the move itself.

"Let go!" The nun viciously demanded, the tip of her blade trembling ever so slightly.

Lu Xiao Feng did not let go.

"I haven't wronged you, why won't you let go?" The girl in red asked, biting her lip, she could not laugh anymore.

Lu Xiao Feng still did not let go, nor did he reply.

"A big man like yourself picking on a little girl, have you no shame?" Ou Yang Qing coldly laughed, her sword already out of her sleeve.

Lu Xiao Feng was not ashamed of himself. His face did not turn pale nor did it turn red.

That glowing scimitar that Second Madame was holding had also been withdrawn from within her sleeve. It was not much longer than half a meter.

"Between our two swords and one sabre, we could poke dozens of holes in you at any given moment!" She threatened.

"If you don't let go at this moment, we'll make sure you die here!" Ou Yang Qing immediately added.

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly laughed.

"You don't believe what we are saying?" Second Madame questioned him.

"I believe every word that every one of you have said," Lu Xiao Feng answered with a smile, "but I don't believe you will really make a move!"

"Oh really?" Second Madame coldly snickered.

"Because I'm sure you have all noticed, I'm not a gentleman!" Lu Xiao Feng casually observed.

"You are not even a man!" The nun viciously rebuked.

"So therefore, I am capable of quite a lot of things!"

"What are you planning to do to her?" The Second Madame's expression changed noticeably.

"I really want to let her go!"

This reply was totally unexpected.

"Why aren't you letting her go?" Second Madame immediately inquired.

"As soon as you promise me two things, I'll let her go!"

Second Madame pondered for a bit.

"As long as you let her go, forget about two things, even if..."

The next portion of what she wanted to say was: "... even if it was two hundred things, I'll comply!"

But Second Madame did not finish her sentence.

"Even if it was half a promise, we will never comply!" Third Madame, who had been quietly sitting in her seat this entire time, suddenly shouted.

Her voice was still that slow, that gentle, that tender. But by the time the final word came out of her mouth, she struck! Her strike was neither slow nor tender. Her weapon of choice was a whip, a glowing, ebony black, snake-like whip. While she was quietly and peacefully sitting there, she had secretly unwound her whip under the table. When she struck with her whip, it flew in even faster than a snake, and even deadlier than the deadliest of snakes.

"Watch out for Seventh Sister!" Second Madame uttered in surprise.

But Third Madame did not seem to care. The tip of the whip curled like the head of a poisonous snake as it headed toward the fatal artery just below and behind Lu Xiao Feng's ear. But Lu Xiao Feng had already slid out of the way, taking along with him the girl in red, they slid out about 3 meters. The Third Madame suddenly lept up in the air and sent her whip crashing down from above. She seemed to have completely forgotten that her Sister was completely at the mercy of her foe as her moves left no course of retraction. Lu Xiao Feng sighed to himself. He did not believe that such a quiet and proper lady as this Third Madame would be such an aggressive woman. He did not believe that she would actually attack.

Now that she had attacked, what could he possibly do to the girl in red? If he harmed her, then her sisters would surely fight him to the death. If he let her go, then her sisters would still fight him to the death. So the only thing left for him to do was to fight back! Other than that, he did not seem to have any other options. The whip from Third Madame just simply did not allow him to have another road to take.

Second Madame suddenly stomped her foot.

"Alright, let's get rid of him first!"

"What about our Sister?" Ou Yang Qing asked.

"If he dares to touch one hair on our sister, I'll cut off every piece of meat from his body off his bones piece by piece!"

During this simple exchange, Third Madame's snapped her whip 20 times more. Lu Xiao Feng sighed again. He did not like seeing people bleed and especially detests seeing women bleed. But he was not able to keep dodging any longer, that whip was truly too fast, too fierce. He had to retaliate. Like a shooting rainbow, Second Madame's scimitar came piercing in as well. Her moves were strange, but they were even more vicious than they were unorthodox.

Now that she had made a move, it was impossibility for Ou Yang Qing to not participate either. But it was at this precise moment, a "bang" could be heard as a wine cup hit her scimitar. A pair of chopsticks suddenly came in from the side and grabbed a hold of that snake-like whip. Ah-Tu!

That pair of chopsticks was, incredibly, in Ah-Tu's hand!

The Third Madame's complexion was a steely green as she glared at him.

"I don't like to be forced by others!" She slowly said.

"I know," replied Ah-Tu.

"If I fell into his hands, none of you needs worry about me and hold anything back either!"

"I know."

"Then why aren't you letting me attack?"

"Because even though he might not be a gentleman, he's still a human being after all!"

"Huh?"

"At least he hasn't used our Sister as a shield against your whip!"

Third Madame thought about it for a moment before slowly returning to her seat. Once again, she was properly and quietly sitting in her seat, not moving one bit. Second Madame sat down as well, holding her wrist in one hand. Even though she had held on to her scimitar, her wrist was numb with pain due to the wine cup. But there was nary a trace of indignation on her face. She seemed completely submissive towards this scab covered beggar. Lu Xiao Feng eyes were glowing.

"You were saying earlier about two promises that you wanted us to make?" Ah-Tu suddenly asked.

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"Why don't you tell us the first one!"

"I was going to ask you to take me to First Madame Gong Sun!"

"And now?"

"Now that is needless!"

"Why?"

Lu Xiao Feng looked at him straight in the face.

"Because now I am already watching First Madame Gong Sun!"

Ah-Tu smiled. His smile looked very odd, it looked liked the smile of a mannequin.

"In all honesty, I should have figured out you were First Madame Gong Sun a long time ago," Lu Xiao Feng sighed despite of himself. "Not only did I follow you for a day, I had seen you once before!"

"Actually, more than once!" Ah-Tu laughed.

"More than once?" Lu Xiao Feng was quite surprised by this revelation.

"That night in the WestGarden was not the first meeting between us!"

"Then where was our first meeting?" Lu Xiao Feng was even more puzzled.

Ah-Tu did not answer his question directly, but instead asked a question in return.

"Do you remember Huo Xiu?"

Of course Lu Xiao Feng remembers Huo Xiu.

"That day when you walked out from Huo Xiu's little pavilion and was waiting at the foot of the hill for Hua Man Lou, did an old woman carrying a hand basket full of a freshly picked herbs walk by you?"

"That woman was you?" Lu Xiao Feng almost shouted.

Ah-Tu nodded.

"You were also there on that day?"

Again, Ah-Tu laughed a little.

"If I wasn't there, then how is it that Huo Xiu is now trapped in that cage?"

Lu Xiao Feng was speechless. Only now, at this very moment, did he finally understand why Huo Xiu's machine beneath the stone platform malfunctioned. It was not because a mouse had randomly found its way in and locked the machine up. There is nothing in the world that coincidental, and there is no such thing as miracles either. After all, miracles are nothing but creations of man!

"I knew that Huo Xiu was an old fox, but I wouldn't have cared even if he had cut you up and sold you to the butcher," Ah-Tu continued. "But he

shouldn't have sold Shang Guan Fei Yan as well."

Of course, Shang Guan Fei Yan was one of her people as well. Lu Xiao Feng suddenly remembered that pair of red shoes with a flying swallow embroidered on them.

"He killed my sister, then he must die," Ah-Tu nonchalantly concluded. "Even though he's still alive at this moment, I think he would much rather be dead!"

"Did Xue-Er see you that day?" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly asked.

"That kid is truly a clever little devil," Ah-Tu smiled. "After you two left, she immediately found her way to where the machinery under the stone platform was. She knew that there must be something down there!"

"She saw you?"

"No, she didn't see him, but she did see the pair of red shoes that I left there!"

"And that's why she thought that her sister wasn't actually dead!" Lu Xiao Feng smiled sadly.

"In the end, she is still just a kid, she's still too wishful in her thinking," Ah-Tu sighed. "Those who died in Huo Xiu's hands could never come back!"

"And that's why you left Huo Xiu alive, you are leaving him to her!"

"Correct, I want her to get her revenge herself."

"But I don't get it, why would you leave all of Huo Xiu's treasures to her? You look like you need that treasure very much as well!"

Ah-Tu's eyes suddenly displayed a very odd expression.

"Pity that the amount that she could get from Huo Xiu is not much anymore."

"Oh?"

"That treasure had long fallen into another's hands, nobody could possibly hope to get a single tael of silver from this person's hands!"

"Who is this person?" Lu Xiao Feng frowned. "And how did this huge treasure fall into this person's hands?"

Ah-Tu stared off into the distance, her eyes filled with an indescribable color of terror.

"You had said you wanted us to promise you two things," she suddenly changed the subject and coldly asked. "You have told us one, what is the other thing?"

"I want you to leave with me!"

"You want me to go with you?" Ah-Tu laughed again. "Have you fallen for me?"

"Indeed I have!"

"Have you fallen for that sugar roasted chestnut selling granny?" Ah-Tu asked, stilling chuckling. "Or this scab covered beggar?"

"I have fallen for another you!"

"You are talking about - the Embroidery Bandit?" Ah-Tu's eyes flickered.

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"You think I'm the Embroider Bandit?"

"Do you deny it?"

"Looks like even if I deny it now, it would be of no use!" Ah-Tu sighed.

The facts were there, the evidences fit, what use could her denial have?

"Well, at least you had rescued me once," Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "I'm not a person who forgets such things!"

"I know," Ah-Tu plainly replied, "you are just an idiot egg!"

All Lu Xiao Feng could do was pretend he did not hear that.

"Are you planning to take me to Jin Jiu Ling for the punishment?"

"I guarantee that you will receive a fair and impartial trial and judgement!"

Suddenly, there was a "dong!" Second Madame's scimitar had been spiked into the table. The green clothed known was holding the blade of her sword in her other hand. Ou Yang Qing's expression was one of a cold snicker, and Jiang Qing Xia's lips were pale.

"You want my big sister to go with you? Are you dreaming?" The girl in red suddenly began to laugh, her laughter now was no longer that joyous to listen to.

"He's not dreaming," Ah-Tu plainly declared after she had finished laughing. "I could very well leave with him!"

The girl in red was speechless, everyone was speechless. Even Lu Xiao Feng was caught off guard by what she just said.

"I like men who could get things done, men with abilities," Ah-Tu slowly continued. "If a man with some real abilities show up, I would be willing to go anywhere with him."

Someone was laughing.

This time it was Ou Yang Qing.

She was the first one to understand Ah-Tu's meaning: "So if you want our big sister to leave with you, first you have to show us if you truly got what it takes!"

"I have quite a number of abilities," Lu Xiao Feng smiled, "it's just that I don't know which particular ones are you looking for?"

"I only want to see three kinds!"

"Three kind?"

Ah-Tu stared at him, her pupils seemingly dilating.

"We will have three rounds, if you can beat me twice out of the three rounds, then I'll go with you!"

"Best of three? This sounds quite interesting!"

"I guarantee it will be more interesting than you can hope for!"

Lu Xiao Feng's eyes flickered.

"So what are we going to compete in the first round? Drinking?" He joked. He knew that she was not going to compete drinking with him. Only the dumbest of women would compete drinking with a man like him.

But Ah-Tu replied with a sentence that he could not have expected even in his wildest of dreams: "Ok! Drinking it is!"

Only when the wine was placed on the table did Lu Xiao Feng realize that he just did another very dumb thing. At the moment, he was tired like an old ox and starving like a crippled wolf. What he needed to drink most right now is a huge bowl of chicken soup, but instead he asked for a drinking contest.

Drink is not that different from any other activity, it requires energy. Besides, at the moment, it was not a big deal for First Madame Gong Sun to get drunk, but he could ill afford to be, this place is crawling with First Madame Gong Sun's people. In reality, he should not even think about touching just a drop of alcohol. But there were six jugs of wine on the table now. Six jugs of Song of Huzhou.

By now, the scabs and scars on "Ah-Tu"'s body was no where to be found, nor was he bald anymore. "He" had just changed into a soft and fluffy outfit, there was some slight make up on "her" face. Appearance-wise, she looked just like an ordinary middle aged house wife. Could this be her real appearance? Lu Xiao Feng could not tell, nor could he guess. Nobody knows what First Madame Gong Sun really looked like. Even her voice could change at any given moment. At the moment, her voice was one of a diligent hostess entertaining her guest.

"Six jugs of wine for 2 people to drink," she smiled as she stared at Lu

Xiao Feng, "do you think this would be enough?"

"I think it would be enough for 2 horses," Lu Xiao Feng shot back a miserable smile, "pity the food to help the wine go down isn't much to talk about!"

There was still only that small plate of cold vegetables on the table.

"There isn't enough food, that is true," First Madame Gong Sun smiled. "Luckily, we are having a drinking contest, not an eating one!"

Of course, she knew that when one drinks on an empty stomach, the amount of alcohol one can drink reduces to by at least one fold; and right now Lu Xiao Feng's stomach is empty like a beggar's wallet. After just three bowls of wine, he was already feeling something was not right; after 6 bowls, he suddenly began to feel as if he was doing alright, two more bowls, and he discovered that he was almost fighting the urge to gorge himself silly with wine. Then, for some unknown reason, he suddenly discovered that he was puking, puking so hard that he was sure he was puking all of his innards out.

"You are drunk!" First Madame Gong Sun was still as sober and collected as Guan Zhong. "You lost this round!"

Lu Xiao Feng wanted to refute that, yet he could not, so all he could say was some quite mumbles in response.

"I don't feel drunk at all, it's just that my stomach is feeling a bit uncomfortable!"

"Are you not admitting defeat?"

"Alright I'll admit it, what's the big deal!"

Of course, it was no big deal. In his mind right now, there was nothing in the world that is of great importance. Besides, so he lost the first round, there was still two rounds left. But he forgot one thing. Losing this round has ensured that he has also lost the next two rounds as well. The only thing that a drunk man can compete with other people in is sleeping. Obviously, First Madame Gong Sun was not going to have a sleeping contest with him.

"For the second round, we'll have a sword duel!" First Madame Gong Sun casually declared.

"Alright, a sword duel!" Lu Xiao Feng puffed out his chest. "What's the big deal?"

"Good, please wait here while I go change!" First Madame Gong Sun asked.

"You are changing again?"

"Mm!"

"Are we having a duel or are we having a fashion competition?"

"See, you just don't understand, when dueling, one must wear an outfit for dueling!"

"Why?"

First Madame Gong Sun smiled.

"Because one's clothing can affect one's disposition, one's demeanor; and also because women naturally like to change!"

Lu Xiao Feng was now no longer hungry nor tired. Alcohol can usually give people a strange kind of energy and strength. But this surge of energy and strength is a deceiving kind - even if it could not fool anyone else, it could at least be used to fool one's self. He was suddenly reminded of those "Drunken Masters" that was a part of the folklores of the martial world. Rumors say that these people "only fight well when they are drunk, and the more they drink the better they fight."

The stories says that the tiger killing Wu Song of the legendary Heroes of the Water Margins was one such of a man. If he drank one jug of wine, he would have one "jug" worth of fighting ability, if he drank 10 jugs of wine, then he would be 10 times better. Right now, Lu Xiao Feng felt as if he had drank about 10 jugs of wine. He suddenly felt a great surge of confidence in himself, as if his own ability had improved 10 folds. Even if he was attacked by 7 or 8 tigers now, he was sure that he would be able to beat every single one of them to death. Pity that what he faces now was not tigers but First Madame Gong Sun. When true masters duel, one's timing, positioning, and decision making must not be off by even the slightest of margins.

Could Lu Xiao Feng still make the correct decisions and judgements at this moment? From the looks of him, he was having a hard time deciding whether or not this room was round or square. Until now, Jiang Qing Xia had not said half a word to him, but at the moment, the look in her eyes carried with them a hint of sympathy and sadness, as if she was watching a person that was about to die soon. Other than the Third Madame, the looks in the eyes of all those present was similar to hers.

Lu Xiao Feng stared at Third Madame for a moment before suddenly bursting out with a smile.

"If I lose, could it be ok if I cut off my ears and give them to you?"

"I already told you, I'm not looking for ears anymore!" Third Madame quietly replied.

"Oh that's right, you are now looking for tongues!"

"But I don't want your tongue!"

"Then what do you want?"

"I want your head!"

"Alright!" Lu Xiao Feng leaned back and heartily laughed. "If I lose, then I will hand this head of mine over to you!"

To him, whether someone had a head or not did not seem that

important. Now, when Jiang Qing Xia looked at him, it was as if she was looking at a headless person, even the look from that girl in red showed some pity. Anybody could easily see that this four browed drunk was going to lose this next round!

But Lu Xiao Feng was still looking for some more wine. The wine jugs were on the table in front of him, yet he still did not see them. This was because his eyes had practically jumped out of their sockets, for someone had just stepped out from the back. It was a woman. A beautiful woman, a woman more dazzling than the sunrise, more graceful than a queen, more heavenly than an angel. Even the clothes she was wearing did not seem to be made by human hands but was instead created by weaving together the colors and the otherworldly glow of the rainbows in the sky.

Lu Xiao Feng did not recognize this woman, for never in his life had he seen such a woman of such beauty and grace. Fortunately, he still recognized the swords in her hands, a pair of short, almost dagger-like swords with blades about 20 centimeters long and a sash of red silk tied to each handle. Could she be First Madame Gong Sun? The same person as that ordinary middle aged house wife just a while earlier? The same person as that scab covered beggar, that sugar roasted chestnut selling granny? Lu Xiao Feng was rubbing his eyes. He almost could not believe what he was seeing in front of him.

First Madame Gong Sun was staring back at him, smiling.

"Do you not recognize me anymore?"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"There is just one thing I can't figure out!"

"What is that?"

"I can't figure out why a woman as beautiful as you would want to dress up like a old granny. If I were you, I wouldn't do that even if I had a knife up against my neck!"

"Well how do you know that this is my true appearance?"

"I don't know, I'm actually just hoping really!"

"Why is that?"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed again.

"Because if I have to die in someone's hands, my only wish is for me to die in the hands of someone like you."

"Well you really do know how to sweet talk a lady don't you?" First Madame Gong Sun coquettishly replied. "Even my heart is getting close to being swept away."

She gracefully approached him, the rainbow colored outfit of hers swayed to some unfelt breeze, looking like hundreds of thousands of strands of dancing silk.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed yet again.

"Next time I get in a sword duel, I'll make sure to dress up in an outfit like yours!"

"Oh?"

"You haven't even made a move yet, and my eyes are already getting blurred!"

"My heart is swept away, your eyes are blurred, I guess that makes us even!"

"Not quite!"

"No?"

"You have a pair of swords in your hand, all I've got is a handful of sweat!"

"Where's your sword?"

"I don't carry a sword!"

"You carry a sabre?"

"No, don't carry that either."

"A person like you? Not carrying any weapons when he goes out?" First Madame Gong Sun sighed. "That's really quite dangerous!"

"It is very dangerous, especially today."

"Do you want to borrow a sword?"

"Yes."

"Who do you want to borrow from?"

Lu Xiao Feng turned and smiled toward the Nun in Green.

First Madame Gong Sun sighed again.

"Turns out he's not really drunk, he knows his stuff."

This sword was not that long either, but it almost seemed to glow. The sword's aura was forboding and oppressive. Just the slightest flick of a thumb caused it to ring endlessly.

"Such an excellent sword!" Lu Xiao Feng could not help but praise it as he gripped the sword in his hand.

"Shame that this sword would today be in the hands of a soon to be dead drunkard!" The Nun in Green coldly observed.

Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"The drunkard truly is a drunkard, but I wouldn't be too sure about that soon to be dead part!"

By now they had made their way down the pavilion and into the yard outside. Star light twinkled through spaces between the leaves of that huge ginkgo tree and onto Lu Xiao Feng's face. That drunk look had suddenly and completely vanished from his eyes, he looked as sober as Zhu Ge Liang.

"You are not drunk?" Second Madame uttered in disbelief.

Lu Xiao Feng did not refute her claim.

"If you weren't drunk, then why did you admit defeat?" Second Madame pressed.

Lu Xiao Feng let out a little smile.

"If I didn't admit defeat first round, I would have surely lost this second round, and forget the third round!"

"Looks like this guy isn't really an idiot egg," Second Madame sighed.

"But he is truly a bastard egg!" The girl in red viciously sniped, biting her lip.

“Even if you did admit defeat the first round, you still might not win this second round!” First Madame Gong Sun casually observed.

As soon as she finished her sentence, she made her move. Flashes of sword danced about as those multi-colored strands of silk she was wearing began to dance as well. Her entire being seemed to have turned into a dazzling and blinding sunrise, making it almost impossible for one to keep one’s eyes open, much less trying to make out where she was or where her swords were. If one cannot even make out where she was, how was one suppose to see her moves?

During his first encounter with her, Lu Xiao Feng already knew that her moves and techniques were unpredictable and ever changing, to a point where they were almost more frightening than Xi Men Chui Xue’s moves. But only now did he know that last time her techniques were nowhere close to being at their full power. It seemed that the power of this type of technique could only be on full display when used with a multi-colored outfit like this. It had been said that these sword and sashes are not “weapons” but a name for an ancient dance where the dancer dance empty handed, twirling the sashes in air, and that it was only until First Madame Gong Sun did someone take this strictly spectacle dance and, by adding numerous changes, turned it into a true fighting technique that could be used to kill!

Maybe she did not use swords when she danced in front Emperor Sheng Wen Shen Wu out of her fear that the aura of her swords would frighten His Majesty. But in private, she really did create a sword style, turning the “sword and sash” truly into a type of sword.

Since this type of sword style was derived from a dance, it would

obviously be different from all other sword styles. That was why First Madame Gong Sun purposefully changed into this outfit today, even if it revealed what appeared to be her real appearance. Because the true power of this sword style could only be displayed through "beauty", and only a legendary beauty like herself could wield this style to its zenith!

Lu Xiao Feng's heart sighed. It was only until now that he realized that the secrets of martial arts was not something that could be imagined by any one person.

Because this style of sword play was truly too unpredictable, its moves truly too complex, once it starts, it felt just like mercury as it seemed to bore into any and every opening! Even the slightest opening, the slightest mistake in his decisions, or the slightest lapse in concentration could lead to his immediate death! If he wanted to win, he had to rely on just one word!

Speed! Use speed to cut through chaos, use no change to answer ever-change. As soon as First Madame Gong Sun began to make her move, his body had already took off as he flew towards the roof top opposite where they were.

"He's running away!" the girl in red shouted.

Before she even finished saying those three words, Lu Xiao Feng took off again, his being and his sword seemed to have melted into one. The flashes of his sword was like a horse whip, like a rainbow, as it fell towards First Madame Gong Sun from all the way atop the rooftop. The glow of his sword flickered wildly but hurriedly, but there was no change in his move and it almost seemed as if he did not even have an exit move. He had actually transfered all the energy and power in his body into this one

strike. --- No change, no variation, sometimes that is also the best variation of all.

First Madame Gong Sun's body was like the evening glow, her swords were like meteors, yet she still did not have enough time to react. All of the sudden, her body and swords all seemed to have been covered in the shroud of the aura of Lu Xiao Feng's strike.

"Deng!"

The sound echoed through the night.

The sword flashes converged and the silky evening covered the sky as scores of sashes on First Madame Gong Sun's outfit were sliced off.

Nobody moved, nobody made any sound.

First Madame Gong Sun had already stopped moving, she motionlessly stood there, not attacking anymore. Lu Xiao Feng stopped attacking as well, he was also motionlessly standing there, staring at First Madame Gong Sun.

"This round isn't over yet!" Second Madame suddenly shouted. "Why did you two stop?"

"If this round was a killing contest, then obviously it isn't over," Lu Xiao Feng casually replied. "But if this round was a sword duel, then I've already won!"

First Madame Gong Sun finally let out a long sigh.

"True, the power of that strike is something that I cannot defeat!"

"Many thanks."

"But I could have never suspected that you could have pulled off such a move."

Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"Actually, I had just stolen that move!"

"Where did you steal it from?"

"Master of WhiteCloudCastle."

"Ye Gu Cheng?" First Madame Gong Sun was visibly shocked by the answer.

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"This strike is called 'Outer Heaven Angel', it's the essence of Master of White Cloud Castle's sword style, even the Wooden Taoist believes that it could be rightfully called the best sword skill in the world!"

First Madame Gong Sun sighed.

"This move is made before the move actually starts, its application left for after the move is made, it uses hardness to emulate softness, uses no variation as variation." She observed. "It could truly be called the best sword skill in the world!"

"If Master of White Cloud Castle could have heard First Madame say that himself, he would no doubt be very pleased!" Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"But had this move been pulled off by him, it might not have beaten me!" First Madame Gong Sun coldly replied.

"Why not?" Lu Xiao Feng could not resist his curiosity.

"Because he is an unmatched master swordsman, before he even made a move, I would have already been on guard for a move. But just then, when you had jumped onto the ridge of the roof, I had thought that you were trying to escape instead, hence my concentration slipped, hence I couldn't block the strike you made with all the strength in your body!"

"And also because I didn't even carry a sword," Lu Xiao Feng smiled and added. "You probably didn't think I was capable of such a move!"

"That is why softness can defeat hardness or how the weak can defeat the strong, it is the same principle!" First Madame Gong Sun sighed.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed as well.

"Luckily I'm not a famous swordsman at all, or else I might have really died in your hands today!"

"But you haven't won yet!" First Madame Gong Sun's expression darkened. "We still have the third round!"

The third and deciding round!

"What do you want to compete in the third round?" Lu Xiao Feng asked.

"Qing-Gong, lightness arts!"

Lu Xiao Feng let out a little laugh.

"I know that lightness kungfu is your specialty; besides, you are a man and naturally have a strength advantage over me." First Madame Gong Sun added. "Competing against you in this with you definitely puts me at a disadvantage, so...."

"So I should cut you some slack and let you get a little advantage as well!" Lu Xiao Feng finished for her.

"You should at least let me get an early start!"

"No problem!"

"But if you catch me, then you'd have won, so you are not really getting the short end of the stick here anyways."

"I'm not a person who does things that gives himself the short end of the stick!"

"I'll order someone to hit the gong once as a signal, you can only start chasing once the gong stops ringing!"

"The gong is only hit once?"

"Just once."

"Looks like I'm not really getting the short end of the stick after all!"

"But I just have to...."

"Of course you have to go change!" Lu Xiao Feng eagerly finished her sentence for her. "There's an outfit for drinking, an outfit for dueling, of course there has to be another outfit for racing."

First Madame Gong Sun let out a peal of laughter.

"You really aren't an idiot, not at all!" She said coquettishly.

The night was as cold as water. The expressions on the sisters' faces were cold like water too -- like frozen water.

The girl in red suddenly let out a bitterly cold snicker.

"Lying about being drunk, then stealing other's moves, I despise this kind of man the most."

Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"I wasn't trying to make you like me to begin with!"

"I just want to ask you, are you a real man or not?"

"Can't you tell?"

"I can't tell."

"I figured you wouldn't be able to," Lu Xiao Feng sighed, "you are still just a kid!"

The girl in red shot him a vicious look before swiftly turning around and walking off, as if she could not be bothered with him anymore.

Ou Yang Qing's eyes flickered slightly.

"Well you can't dismiss me as a mere kid can you?" She asked.

"Of course you are not a kid, you are almost old enough to be a granny."

Ou Yang Qing also shot him a vicious look before turning and walking off into the pavilion.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed and took a seat on the stone steps.

"If a man lives to be sixty, at least 10 years of his life would have been a total waste." He mumbled to himself.

"How is it wasted?" Second Madame's curiosity got the better of her.

"Of those 10 years, at least 5 years is wasted waiting for women to change."

"And the other 5 years?"

"You sure you want to hear it?"

"Are you scared to say it?"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed again.

"Well, if you must know, I'll tell you. The other 5 years are wasted waiting for women to take them off."

Second Madame's face flush red with fury while the nun in green's face

turned white in anger.

"I changed my mind!" Third Madame suddenly declared.

"Changed your mind about what?" This time it was Lu Xiao Feng's curiosity that got the best of him.

"I have decided that I want to cut off your tongue instead!" Third Madame coldly answered. At this time, a man in a green shirt with a faceful of beard came walking out of the pavilion carrying a gong in his hand and stopped on the stone steps.

"I guess my luck isn't that bad after all." Lu Xiao Feng mumbled to himself again. "At least I'm waiting for First Madame to change, if I was waiting for someone else, that could have been really bad!"

"Someone else?" Third Madame shot him a vicious look.

"I didn't say you, what are you getting all worked up over?" Lu Xiao Feng replied.

Third Madame's face was turning red and white in anger as well now. At this moment, the gong suddenly rang as 3 people flew out from within the pavilion.

The three beings were all dressed in identical black outfits, even their faces looked the same. As soon as they flew out the building, they somersaulted once and shot out in three different directions. The techniques the 3 of them used were the same as well. Before the ringing

of the gong had stopped, all three were outside of the walls surrounding the yard. Which one was the real First Madame Gong Sun? -- The girl in red and Ou Yang Qing had pretended to get mad just moments before strictly so they could go back in and dress up as the two decoys. Who should Lu Xiao Feng chase after? No matter which one he chooses to chase after, even if he caught up to her, he would have surely lost the other 2.

And of those 2 that he lost, it is more than likely that one of them was First Madame Gong Sun. This was like the old shell game, except much harder. Lu Xiao Feng was at a lost as to what to do.

Second Madame, Third Madame, and the nun in green all had a slither of a cold sneer on their faces -- Lu Xiao Feng still fell into a trap this time.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed as well.

"Looks like I still fell for her tricks this time!" He miserably smiled as he stood up and mumbled. "Well no matter what, let's catch one and go from there!"

He took off, but suddenly, and just as quickly, flew back and, in a blink of an eye, grabbed the wrist of the man carrying the gong.

"Bang!"

The gong fell onto the ground as the man was startled by this turn of events.

"What did you do that for?" He asked in a raspy voice.

"Not for any particular reason," Lu Xiao Feng smiled. "I just want to take you to meet someone!"

"Who?"

"Jin Jiu Ling!"

The man stared at him, stared at him for a long time before suddenly bursting out in laughter, beautiful laughter that sounded like the orioles chirping.

"Lu Xiao Feng truly is Lu Xiao Feng, even I'm impressed!"

Turned out that this gong carrying man was the real First Madame Gong Sun.

"How did you see through my disguise?"

Nobody could figure out how Lu Xiao Feng had saw through it all.

"When Miss Ou Yang got mad and walked back inside, I knew something was wrong!" Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"Why is that?"

"Because she's not the type of person whom I could chase off in anger with just one sentence!"

"Three women went in and three women came back out, how did you know that I wasn't among those three?"

"I didn't."

"You didn't?"

"I only know that a grown man with a faceful of beard shouldn't smell this good!"

First Madame Gong Sun sighed.

"Seems like I shouldn't have stood this close to you," she observed with an exasperated smile, "it is really quite dangerous for a woman to get too close to you!"

"Especially a woman who smells as good as you!" Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

First Madame Gong Sun let out a peal of laughter.

"But I could have never thought that you would be like a little puppy, not only could you use your eyes, but your nose as well!"

"This is also something that I have only recently picked up from

someone else!"

"From Hua Man Lou?"

"Correct."

"Seems like anybody else's good traits would get picked up by you in no time!" First Madame Gong Sun sighed.

"That's because I'm always very modest."

"A modest person would always have good fortunes!" First Madame Gong Sun nodded.

"That's why all of you should be a little modest right now and listen to what I have to say!"

"We are all listening!" First Madame Gong Sun assured him.

"Now that you have fallen into my hands, if your sisters want you to stay safe and sound, then they would do best to stay here for instructions." His eyes slowly scanned over Second Madame and Third Madame's faces before coldly continuing. "If someone still want to try something, then that means she wants you to die sooner so she could take over and be the head of this place."

"Don't worry, nobody here wants me to die!" First Madame Gong Sun smiled and replied.

Third Madame suddenly stomped her foot despite of her cold demeanor.

"Do you really intend to leave with him?"

"You should know that I'm not a person who would go back on my words," First Madame Gong Sun casually replied. "Besides, even if I didn't want to leave with him, I would still have to. As soon as this man grabs a hold of a woman, he wouldn't let go even if it killed him."

"Especially a woman as pretty and smelled as good as you." Lu Xiao Feng nonchalantly added.

"Right now, I just want you to be careful of one thing!" First Madame Gong Sun said.

"What's that?"

"Careful your hands don't get cut off!"

Chapter 9 - Success and Failure

Meng Wei had always been very alert even in his sleep. A man known around the pugilist world as "Three-Headed Snake" must be a light sleeper, else his head would have been cut off a long time ago even if he had thirty heads. But when he woke up tonight, there was already a person standing at the head of his bed, watching him with a pair of almost glowing eyes. The night was still deep, there was no light in the room, so he could not make out this person's face.

He suddenly felt that the center of his fists were covered in cold sweat. This person did not move, nor did he. He even purposefully let out a couple of snores to trick the person into believing that he was still asleep. Suddenly, he made his move as he tried to grab the sabre that was hidden underneath his armpit. But that person's movement was even faster. As soon as his arm began to move, this person immediately pinned his shoulders down onto the bed. Never in his life had he ever met a person with such a strong pair of hands, had these hands been around his throat, his breathing would have stopped within an instant.

In reality, his breathing was almost about to stop anyways.

"What do you want?" He asked in a shaken voice.

This person's answer was very simple.

"Money."

"How much?" Meng Wei immediately asked.

"A hundred thousand taels!" This was quite a greedy person as well. "If you can't hand over 100,000 taels, I'll take your life!"

"I'll hand the money over!" Meng Wei did not even hesitate.

"I want it all right now!"

"I can give them to you right now!"

The person suddenly began to laugh.

"Didn't know that Boss Meng was such a generous man."

As he laughed, his voice changed. Such a familiar voice.

"Lu Xiao Feng?" Meng Wei uttered in surprise.

"That's me." The person nodded.

Meng Wei took a couple of deep breaths before he gave into the urge to complain.

"That was quite a funny joke you played there, scared me half to death!"

"I wasn't planning on playing this joke either," Lu Xiao Feng's answered with an apologetic laugh. "But I'm feeling particularly cheerful today!"

"You've caught the Embroidery Bandit?" Meng Wei's eyes immediately lit up.

"Where's your Boss Jin?" Lu Xiao Feng did not answer but instead asked a question of his own.

"He already went back to the city!"

"Is the poison giving him any trouble?"

"Lucky for him you immediately took him to Doctor Shi's place, Shi Jing Mo is indeed a great doctor."

"I have a fugitive with me, so I have to be extra careful. That's why I could only come to you at night, I can't let her underlings find out where I am!"

"I understand." Meng Wei replied. Secretly, he was quite relieved with himself that he did not let Xiao Hong stay the night. He had never let a woman stay the night because he had never trusted any woman. This was a good habit that he had just decided that he must continue to uphold -- had Lu Xiao Feng found a famed prostitute such as Xiao Hong sleeping on his bed, there was a risk that Boss Jin would find out, and that could not have been a good thing.

Lu Xiao Feng quietly thought for a moment.

"Could you possibly message your people in Yang Cheng with your messenger pigeons to tell your Boss Jin to wait for me midnight tomorrow night at the pavilion where the Snake King used to live?"

"Of course!" Meng Wei jumped up from his bed and slipped on his boots. "I keep the messenger pigeons in the yard just behind here."

"You have brush and ink here too?"

"Yes."

"Well why don't you write your message right now before going outside?"

Meng Wei nodded and lit a couple of lanterns before grinding out some ink.

"Master Lu has succeeded, requests Boss Jin to wait at the Snake King's old headquarter midnight tomorrow night."

For a man who had made a living in the Six Doors ever since he was a little kid, his writing was not all that bad, and the language flowed quite smoothly.

Lu Xiao Feng stood by his side, smiling.

"Why don't you write it in Xiao Zhuan? That way the information won't leak out even if it falls into the wrong hands?"

{Note: Xiao Zhuan is a form of writing that was set down by Qing Shi Huang, the first Emperor of China, as the unifying form of writing for all Chinese. During the Han dynasty, Xiao Zhuan gradually evolved into what is pretty much the Traditional Chinese that we know today; however, the educated elite of China still studied and learned Xiao Zhuan due to its "aesthetic quality". Though most people could not read Xiao Zhuan, it is still used in everyday life, especially as seals.}

"I'm an old, uneducated man." Meng Wei replied with a deprecating smile. "I can't even write Da Zhuan, nevermind Xiao Zhuan. But you don't have to worry, these pigeons are all trained by Boss Jin personally, they won't go astray."

"Would he get this message in time?"

"Absolutely!" Meng Wei assured him as he rolled the message up and carefully placed it into a very delicate carved hollow tube made from a section of bamboo. There was a fire brand imprinted on the surface of the bamboo.

"Are you going to send the message now?"

"I am going right now."

He draped an overcoat over his shoulders and hurriedly walked out. After a bit of a wait, the sound of a bird flapping its wings as it flew by

could be heard overhead.

Lu Xiao Feng waited in his room the entire time, waited until he returned. Only then did he cup his fist and got ready to leave.

"I'm leaving for Yang Cheng right now!"

Meng Wei hesitated but finally had to ask.

"I was just out there, there didn't seem to be anyone outside."

"There isn't."

"Then where is First Madame Gong Sun?" Meng Wei asked with a forced smile.

Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"If you had detained her, would you walk around out in the open with her?"

Meng Wei shook his head.

"Then how do you have her detained?"

"A secret won't be a secret if it gets out," Lu Xiao Feng answered with a casual smile. "Once I escorted her back, I'll tell you when I get the

chance!"

Meng Wei began to smile as well.

"Master Lu truly is a careful and methodical man. Like I said, if Master Lu would go into our profession, he would surely be the number one man in all of Six Doors!"

Unexpectedly, Lu Xiao Feng sighed in reply.

"The thing is, I know that I'll never match up to that Boss Jin of yours no matter what I do!"

"But Master Lu is the one who captured First Madame Gong Sun!"
Meng Wei protested.

Lu Xiao Feng broke out into a miserable smile.

"He got me to do the hard work for him while he enjoys himself relaxing on a bed. Just based on that, you could see how much better he is than I am!"

The set up of the little pavilion was still the same, the only difference being the person sitting in the chair. Jin Jiu Ling was lying on the chair with his eyes shut. His complexion looked excellent, and his mood was excellent as well. That delicate and fulfilling dinner tonight was still in his

belly. Master Mai of BrightnessPark's works could always be counted on to satisfy him. Besides, now that the bandit was captured, he could enjoy life without worry for another couple of years. He felt that he was indeed very fortunate, so lucky that he could find a helper as good as Lu Xiao Feng.

Even though Lu Xiao Feng had not arrived yet, he was not the least bit worried, because he knew that Lu Xiao Feng's plan would never go awry. There was a cup of Persian wine on the table. He picked up the glow in the dark cup and slowly sipped the wine, taking his time to savor its taste. He was indeed a man who knew how to savor and enjoy life. There is not that many men like this in the world. Although Lu Xiao Feng could savor and enjoy life once in a while, unfortunately for him he was such a natural born meddler, always getting his hand in other people's business. Jin Jiu Ling had already decided that once this case was finished, he would never ever get involved in any matter of Six Doors again.

It was at this moment that he heard a light sound on the roof. It was not a loud sound, something that a cat would make as it scuttled around on the roof. His face immediately broke out into a smile. He knew that Lu Xiao Feng must have just arrived, and that he must be carrying something heavy with him. When Lu Xiao Feng moves, he would never make a sound.

"I spent all day and night lugging this heavy chest around, all the while you were comfortably sitting here drinking wine, seems like you are just destined to live the good life!" Jin Jiu Ling had just put down his cup when he heard Lu Xiao Feng sigh outside the window.

The window was already open, Jin Jiu Ling had opened it from the inside. Lu Xiao Feng had not entered himself, but had already pushed in a very large bamboo chest.

"I'm not destined to live the good life," Jin Jiu Ling smiled. "I'm lucky precisely because I have a friend like Lu Xiao Feng around."

When he finished his sentence, Lu Xiao Feng was in front of him.

"Your luck is really better than mine," he asserted with a straight face. "You have all the right friends, I don't."

"This job really was quite difficult to get done, I figured you would be angry," Jin Jiu Ling smiled. "That's why I have already prepared this flask of Persian wine to drink that temper of yours away!"

The golden flask was already on the table, the wine had already been poured into the cup. Jin Jiu Ling offered it up to Lu Xiao Feng with both of his hands.

"I have just personally cooled this on ice cubes, it's guaranteed to cool you down."

Even Lu Xiao Feng had to smile.

"Turns out you really are something else when it comes to making others feel good. Had I been a woman, I probably would have fallen for you too." He took the cup in his hand and drank its contents in one gulp before lifting the bamboo chest up onto the table. "What do you think is in this chest?"

"Is it an embroiderer?" Jin Jiu Ling's eyes flickered.

"Not only can she embroider flowers, but blind men as well!"

Jin Jiu Ling's eyes lit up.

"Lu Xiao Feng truly is Lu Xiao Feng, simply amazing!" He gave him a thumbs up.

"I don't know how many tricks I fell for in my life because of that saying," Lu Xiao Feng broke out into an exasperated laugh. "But the weird thing is, I still like hearing it being said!"

"One kiss, two kisses, nothing beats kissing ***!" Jin Jiu Ling burst out laughing. "Those who does the kissing would never be wrong!"

Still laughing, he made a motion as if he wanted to open the chest.

"Hold on a second." Lu Xiao Feng stopped him in his tracks.

"What for?" Jin Jiu Ling was caught off guard.

Lu Xiao Feng blinked.

"Do you know who this Embroidery Bandit is?"

"Isn't it First Madame Gong Sun?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded. "And do you know what First Madame Gong Sun looks like?" He probed further.

"No idea!"

"Well what's your guess?"

"An old granny?" Jin Jiu Ling hesitated.

"Guess again."

"Well even if she isn't an old gramps, she can't be that young, because a young woman would never do things so expertly and viciously!"

"Oh?"

"And I don't think she would be very pretty, because a pretty woman would never willingly dress up as an old woman!"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"People say that you are almost God-like in your deductions, but this time your deductions are almost pig-like."

"Was I wrong?"

"By quite a lot!"

"Well what kind of a woman is she?"

"The kind that could literally mesmerize men to death, especially men like you!"

"And what kind of a man am I?" Jin Jiu Ling's lips curled up in a pitiful smile.

"You are a pervert. I only hope that you don't get hypnotized by her when you see her!"

"There are all kinds of perverts, at least I'm not the kind who has yet to lay an eye on a woman." Jin Jiu Ling laughed and opened up the chest. He only took a peek but was still startled. The woman in the chest was indeed too beautiful, too beautiful like a sleeping rose resting among a sea of snow. Her age might not be that young anymore, but her beauty was more than enough to make people forget her age.

Jin Jiu Ling sighed.

"Looks like this job wasn't all that bad for you after all!"

The remark elicited a cold sneer from Lu Xiao Feng.

"Where's Hua Man Lou?" He suddenly asked.

"He left!"

"Why didn't he wait for me?" Lu Xiao Feng frowned.

"Because he's in a hurry to get to Mount Zi Jin!"

"To do what?"

Jin Jiu Ling sighed.

"Master of White Cloud Castle has arranged a duel with Xi Men Chui Xue on the first of the coming month at Mount Zi Jin!"

Lu Xiao Feng's expression changed.

"There's already quite a number of people who knew about this and not a few from around here has already left for Mount Zi Jin. From what I heard, somebody has apparently placed huge bets on the two of them. The odds are laying down 3 to 2 in favor of Ye Gu Cheng!"

"What's today's date?"

"The 24th!"

"If I leave right now, I might make it in time!" Lu Xiao Feng jumped up.

"But this First Madame Gong Sun...."

"My part of this whole job is finished, from head to toe, she's all yours."

"Are you trying to tempt me?" Jin Jiu Ling asked with an embarrassed smile.

"I just hope that you are a person who can resist temptations!"

"Don't worry."

"I can't."

"This woman is a poisonous snake, I'm not that brave you know, I'm very wary of getting bitten!" Jin Jiu Ling laughed.

"I'm worried precisely because she can't bite right now!"

"Poisonous snakes have moments when they can't bite?"

"I've already forced her to take a huge dose of her own 'Seven Days Drink', even if she wakes up, she still could not move for at least 2 or 3 more days."

Jin Jiu Ling listened in silence, the name 'Seven Days Drink' seemed vaguely familiar to him.

"So in those 2 or 3 days, no matter what you do to her, she can't resist."

But if you really did do anything to her, then you are in big trouble, and so would I!"

"Well if you are really worried, why don't you stay?" Jin Jiu Ling offered with a smile.

"Because I'm even more worried about Xi Men Chui Xue!" Lu Xiao Feng seemed all prepared to jump out of the window when he paused for a second. "There is still one thing I have to ask you to do for me!"

"Please don't hesitate to ask."

"Please find out where Xue Bing is, I don't know how to get information from people, you do!"

"Don't worry, even if she turned out to be a mannequin, I would still find a way to get her to talk!" Jin Jiu Ling could not refute his claim before suddenly remembering. "There's a horse outside, I rode it here."

It was well known that Jin Jiu Ling was a modern day Bo Le and was one of the best judges of horses around. The horse that he rode here on must have been a fine horse.

"Are you willing to let me borrow it?" Lu Xiao Feng was ecstatic.

Jin Jiu Ling nodded but then broke out into a smile.

"But... there is one thing I'm worried about!"

"What's that?"

"The horse is a mare!"

Lu Xiao Feng left, left with that flask of Persian wine. The sound of hooves and neighs that came from below soon became distant. That horse was truly a thoroughbred. Jin Jiu Ling pushed open the window and peered out. Down below, in the yard, someone gave him a slight nod. -- Lu Xiao Feng was on the horse. The sound of the hooves had disappeared. Only then did Jin Jiu Ling close the window, walked back to the table, and curled up the sleeves of the girl inside the chest.

On the lotus root white, smooth as jade arm, there was a dark purple, coin sized birth mark in the shape of a cloud.

Jin Jiu Ling carefully inspected it for a bit before a proud smile crept up on his face.

"She is First Madame Gong Sun!" He mumbled.

How did he know that First Madame Gong Sun had a birthmark like that? To a woman, only the people closest to her would know about this kind of secret. Jin Jiu Ling closed the lid, lifted it up, and hurriedly carried it down the pavilion. Just outside of the front door was a green feathered carriage sedan, Jin Jiu Ling, still carrying the chest with him, sat himself down onto the carriage. The two man who were suppose to carry the

sedan around were none other than the two strongest bounty hunters in the city. Before he even said a word, they had already picked up the sedan and was quickly making their way down the street.

Sitting on the sedan, Jin Jiu Ling's face was one of great satisfaction, his plan was now 90% complete. The sedan turned into an alley, and then 7 or 8 more alleys, before it finally made its way onto a real street. At the head of the alley there waited an ebony colored horse carriage.

Still carrying the chest with him, Jin Jiu Ling got off the sedan and onto the carriage. The carriage sped down the street with the driver constantly whipping the horse, controlling it as if it was an extension of his arm. He was none other than Yang Cheng's famous bounty hunter, Lu Shao Hua.

There was nobody to be seen on the streets, at every intersection, there would be 2 men on the rooftops on either side of the road giving the same hand signals:

"There's no suspicious night walkers out close by, there's nobody following the carriage."

The carriage then turned down 7 or 8 more streets. Now even the people out on the rooftops was gone. Only the two of them knew where this carriage was headed.

In the west corner of the city there was a street that was not in grid with the other streets, it was short and narrow. There were only a total of 7 buildings on this street, each of the doors were old and worn down. Of the 7, three were antique shops that sold ancient paintings and writings, but most of them were fakes, two others business which mounts

wallpapers or paintings, another one was a seal carving vendor, and the last one was an umbrella shop.

This was supposed to be a very cold and deserted street, frequented only by those poor and bitter old gentries. But the carriage had stopped at the head of this street. As soon as Jin Jiu Ling got off the carriage, Lu Shao Hua immediately took off. A half-deaf half-blind old man had already opened up the doors to one of the plaster shops. Jin Jiu Ling, still carrying the chest with him, flashed into the door.

Inside the shop were a couple of shabby and not yet framed words or paintings. Jin Jiu Ling brushed aside a forgery of Tang Bo Hu's landscapes and gently lifted up one of the bricks on the wall. A secret door immediately appeared. Behind the door was a very narrow passageway. At the end of the passageway was another door which, upon opening, incredibly led to a very well kept little yard with flowers and trees.

The yard might not be big, but every flower and tree had obviously been meticulously groomed to perfection by masters. Where the trees and bushes were the thickest was a tidy little pavilion of about 5 rooms. There were already two bright eyed, pig tail wearing maids standing at the front steps greeting him.

First Madame Gong Sun finally woke up only to discover that she was in a very delicate female bedroom, lying on a dazzling and comfortable bed. A delicious smell that was more pure and more elegant than that of an orchid permeated the room, but where did it come from? She quietly laid there, no moving. Because she simply could not move. The shadows

by the window was slightly tilted, it was not yet dusk. There were orioles chirping outside, but not a human sound could be heard.

"Anybody here?" She yelled.

Nobody answered. Her yell was not that loud anyways, because she simply did not have the strength to yell.

"Lu Xiao Feng, where did you go off to..." She gritted her teeth and almost cursed. "One of these days, you will die in my hands!"

All she could do was lie there and wait. Then suddenly, her face flushed crimson red -- she needed to relieve herself. But no matter how hard she tried, she could not move one single bit. More yelling was still to no avail. This lasted until she could literally not control it anymore, the only thing she could do was to relieve herself on the bed. This was truly quite an embarrassing matter. The bed was wet, yet she still had to lay there motionlessly. She was so mad she was on the verge of tears.

"Lu Xiao Feng, one of these days, I'll make you beg to die."

Suddenly, something fell from a top the canopy and landed on her. It was a snake. The one thing that scares her the most was snakes. Her face turned green in fear, but she still could not move one bit. All she could do was watch the snake crawl around on top of her. She opened her mouth to scream, but was so frightened that nothing came out.

The snake was just about to crawl onto her face when suddenly a shadow appeared. A person appeared at the head of the bed and, with a

quick flick of hand, grabbed the snake and tossed it out the window. First Madame Gong Sun could at last breathe a sigh of relief, but her face was already covered in cold sweat.

But this person was smiling, staring at her.

"Sorry for the scare First Madame." The person said in a warm voice. Even though he was of middle age, he was still very handsome. Anybody could tell that the clothes he was wearing were made by top notch masters from top notch materials. But it was the smile on his face that was more captivating to woman than the clothes on his body.

First Madame Gong Sun stared at him.

"You... you are the master of this place?"

Jin Jiu Ling nodded.

"How did a snake get in your house?"

"Because I especially went out and caught it!"

First Madame Gong Sun's expression noticeably changed.

"Why?"

"Because I had to make sure whether or not you, First Madame, is really

immobile!”

“Not only did you guys make me drink an immobilizing drug, you sealed my pressure points too,” First Madame Gong Sun bitterly replied. “Isn’t that enough?”

“I have always been a very careful man,” Jin Jiu Ling smiled. “And when it comes to matters regarding you, First Madame, I have to be extra careful.”

“So you are Jin Jiu Ling?” First Madame Gong Sun finally figured it out.

“Didn’t expect that it would take you so long to recognize me!”

“Where did that Bastard Lu die and go off to?” First Madame Gong Sun angrily demanded, gritting her teeth at the mere mention of his name.

“Now that he’s done his part of the job, from head to toe, you, First Madame, are all mine!” Jin Jiu Ling smiled casually.

“Where is this? Why did you bring me here?”

“This place might not be much, but it’s at least got to be better than jail.” Jin Jiu Ling sighed and continued. “I know First Madame must have never been to prison before, that place is truly just like a pig sty. There is mosquitoes and stink bugs everywhere. If you, First Madame, went there, you would be bitten to a pulp within half a day. And if you screamed, then you would immediately be beaten. If you were unlucky enough to run into one of the meaner wardens, then you might also get a shower of

urine as well."

First Madame Gong Sun's face was turning green again.

"You wouldn't want me to take you to a place like that do you?" Jin Jiu Ling inquired rhetorically.

First Madame Gong Sun suddenly let out a cold laugh.

"I know what you really want!"

"Oh?"

"You just want a hand written confession from me!"

"First Madame Gong Sun is indeed a smart woman...." Jin Jiu Ling smiled.

"You want me to confess that I am the Embroidery Bandit, that I committed those heists!"

"Correct, as long as you are willing to write that confession, I will assure you that I will do you no harm, else...."

"Else what?"

"There is quite a lot of snakes around here," Jin Jiu Ling coldly

threatened. "Anytime I want to, I could go and grab a couple hundred of them!"

First Madame Gong Sun gritted her teeth again.

"How did you know that I'm most scared of snakes?"

"I have always known quite a lot of things!"

First Madame Gong Sun suddenly let out another cold laugh.

"Actually, I know quite a lot of things as well!"

"What do you know?"

"At least I know who the real Embroidery Bandit is!" First Madame Gong Sun stared straight into his eyes as she spoke, emphasizing each word.

"Who is that?"

"You! You are the real Embroidery Bandit!"

Jin Jiu Ling silently stood there at the side of the bed, that captivating smile of his had vanished. Not a trace of emotion could be found on his face.

"Actually, from the very beginning, I had suspected that you were the

Embroidery Bandit!" First Madame Gong Sun continued with a sneer.

"Oh?"

"I also know that from the very beginning, you had meant for me to take the fall for you!"

"Even if I am the real Embroidery Bandit, why would I choose you to take the fall for me?"

"Because I have always been a very mysterious person, nobody knows the details about me or my background. Therefore no matter what you accuse me of doing, others wouldn't have a hard time believing it!"

"Just because of that?"

"That, of course, was not the main reason!"

"What other reasons are there?"

"The most important reason is that, among my sisters, one is your accomplice. You want me to take the fall for you, to die in your place, but my death also let her take my position of leadership. You two were trying to kill two birds with one stone from the very start."

Jin Jiu Ling's expression changed slightly but quickly turned back to normal.

"Do you already know who she is?" He casually asked.

"Up until now, I still can't say for sure, but one of these days I will find out!"

"Pity that day will probably never come!" Jin Jiu Ling coldly retorted.

"You know that after these heists occurred, people would come looking for you, because you are the number one bounty hunter within the Six Doors. It's also because of that nobody would ever suspect you."

"My reputation has always been a very good one."

"You went to Lu Xiao Feng, because you knew that only he could be a match for me!"

"He truly is a very smart man, even you would have to concede that!"

"I only concede that he's a pig."

"But if he was a pig, how did you fall into his hands?" Jin Jiu Ling jokingly inquired.

First Madame Gong Sun bit her lip.

"Maybe he is a relatively smart pig, but a pig is still a pig!"

Jin Jiu Ling laughed.

"Precisely because he is a pig, thus he was tricked by you from the very beginning!" First Madame Gong Sun continued.

"Oh?"

"You purposefully gave that black peony to him because you knew that he would go looking for that old granny Xue!"

"I also knew that old granny Xue would surely recognize the peony was a work of a woman!" Jin Jiu Ling triumphantly smiled.

"That's why he was wrong from the very beginning, he thought that the Embroidery Bandit was a woman in disguise!"

"Because he believed that Madame Xue's expert eyes could never be wrong!"

"Then you purposefully instructed Si Kong Zhai Xing to steal that piece of cloth and take it to Jiang Qing Xia's place, because you knew Jiang Qing Xia was one of my sisters!"

"Please go on."

"From that moment on, Lu Xiao Feng had decided that this must all be the work of the Red Shoes Sisterhood!"

"Aren't you forgetting that Si Kong Zhai Xing is the 'King of Thieves'? Why would he listen to me and go lie to Lu Xiao Feng?"

"Because he's the King of Thieves and you are the king of bounty hunters. Even the King of Thieves would be hard pressed not to have some lapses. He must have fallen into your hands sometime before, but you let him go, because you knew that a person like him would be useful one day in the future!"

Jin Jiu Ling sighed.

"Nobody knows about that, you guessed that one didn't you?"

First Madame Gong Sun did not deny his claim but instead continued.

"But just because of that, Lu Xiao Feng still would not have suspected me."

"Correct."

"You knew that once he got to Yang Cheng, he would go to the Snake King."

"Are you saying that the Snake King is an accomplice of mine?"

"Of course he isn't, he's just like Si Kong Zhai Xing, he owed you. That was why he willingly let you use him."

"This time you are wrong!"

"Oh?"

"He willingly let me use him, because he had no other options!"

"Why?"

"The bounty hunters and the law enforcers in Yang Cheng are all my disciples or the disciple of my disciples, not to mention the fact that I had just become the Warden of the Royal Palace. I could wipe him and all of his organization down to the last man off the face of the world any time it pleased me!" Jin Jiu Ling matter of factly answered.

"You knew that I would appear at the West Park on the 15th of July, so you made the Snake King lead Lu Xiao Feng there too!"

"Your whereabouts may be completely mysterious to others, but I know it like the back of my hand."

"Because there is someone among my sisters who constantly informed you of it!"

"I forged a letter and made the Snake King let Lu Xiao Feng read it," Jin Jiu Ling was no longer denying it. "Because I knew Lu Xiao Feng was a man who hated owing favors to others and would insist on going in the Snake King's place!"

"And it was only from that moment on that Lu Xiao Feng truly began to be suspicious of me."

"You shouldn't have tried to get him to eat those sugar roasted chestnuts!"

"That day I had something to take care of at the WestPark, when I am in the middle of something, I hate people who get in my way."

"But he just had and go ask you to find look for red shoes for him!"

"That's why he was truly very lucky not to have died that day."

"Not to mention me."

"But he still couldn't be sure even then, so you and the Snake King got together and kidnapped Xue Bing!"

"Other people say she's a tigress. To me, she looked a lot more like a small kitten!"

"And then you purposefully let Lu Xiao Feng find those two rooms in those small alleys, making him think that they were my hideouts!"

"Setting up those 2 rooms took quite a lot of effort!" Jin Jiu Ling matter of factly replied.

"Ah-Tu, of course, was someone that you had placed there from the very beginning!"

"Because I knew the Lu Xiao Feng would have never been able to find you on his own!"

"But you had known our meeting place way before hand!"

"So I made this weird wooden casket and made Ah-Tu take Lu Xiao Feng there!"

"But why did you pretend to get poisoned?"

Jin Jiu Ling smiled.

"Because I didn't want to go there!"

"As long as you don't go and Lu Xiao Feng does, no matter what happens, who wins or who loses, it would have nothing to do with you!"

"I have always been a very careful man, I never do anything I'm not sure of!" Jin Jiu Ling smiled again.

"You were completely sure about this matter?"

"I knew that you are quite an amazing character yourself and would have probably already seen through my actions. I even knew that you had

already killed Ah-Tu and dressed up as him. The fact that Lu Xiao Feng could find you was because you had led him there yourself!"

"You knew?" First Madame Gong Sun seemed quite surprised.

"Of course I did, but I didn't worry about it too much!"

"Oh?"

"Because I also knew that my plan was about to come to fruition. Every clue, every piece of evidence, pointed to you are the Embroidery Bandit. Even if you knew of my plan, you still did not have a single piece of evidence to prove it." He let out a triumphant laugh and continued. "Add on top of that Xue Bing's disappearance and the Snake King's death, Lu Xiao Feng would already hate you to the bone. So no matter what you claimed, he would never have believed you or let you go. Besides, I'm a famous bounty hunter with a squeaky clean reputation, not to mention his friend, while you are a mysterious female monster!"

Even First Madame Gong Sun could not help but sigh.

"You are quite correct, I don't have a single piece of evidence. Even if I told everyone that you are the Embroidery Bandit, nobody would believe me!"

"And even if you said it now, still nobody will believe you!"

"Don't forget that you have just confessed!" First Madame Gong Sun coldly retorted.

Jin Jiu Ling threw his head back in laughter.

"That's right, I did just confess, but so what if I did?"

"You think that I'm the only one who could have heard what you just said?" First Madame Gong Sun snickered.

"I told you, I never do anything I'm not sure of!"

"You have already made sure that nobody was had followed you here and that I couldn't move, that's why you confessed?"

"I didn't want you to die not knowing why!"

"You are not afraid that Lu Xiao Feng might burst in suddenly?"

"He might be a pig, but he runs pretty fast." Still smiling, he reached into his shirt and took out a branded tube of bamboo. "I just received this. It came from Nan Hai on a messenger pigeon. Lu Xiao Feng had just made it pass Nan Hai and is as of now, well on his way towards Leng Ling."

Once again, First Madame Gong Sun sighed despite of herself.

"Looks like you really have thought of everything!"

"Thank you."

"But you will never ever get a single word of confession from out of me!"

"I thought this out as well," Jin Jiu Ling casually replied. "This confession doesn't necessarily have to be written by you!"

First Madame Gong Sun's expression changed noticeably.

"I could get someone to write a thousand of these confessions any time I want to, anyone will do really. That's because nobody knows what your handwriting looks like anyways."

"That's why you can kill me right now, because I resisted arrest and tried to run away, so you had to kill me!"

"This time you guessed right!" Jin Jiu Ling laughed.

"After I die, this whole matter would be at an end, for there is nobody to contradict your story." First Madame Gong Sun bitterly gritted her teeth. "You would literally get away with it!"

"Even since I was 19, I had always felt that these criminals that get caught were all just stupid pigs. I had wanted to commit the absolute perfect crime for a long time now."

"And now your wish has come true!"

"There's still one last thing to do."

"I'm not dead yet."

"I had planned on letting you live a couple more days, you really are a rare beauty." Jin Jiu Ling sighed. "Pity that I had just discovered that it would be best to kill you as soon as possible."

First Madame Gong Sun stared straight into his eyes and suddenly burst out laughing.

"Do you feel that death is a very funny matter?"

"Death isn't a laughing matter, but you are!"

"Oh?"

"If you turned around, you would know just how funny you are!"

Jin Jiu Ling turned around despite of himself and his entire body froze. Because as soon as he looked behind him, he saw Lu Xiao Feng.

Lu Xiao Feng was smiling at him.

"I'm Lu Xiao Feng, Little Phoenix, not Little Pig."

Chapter 10 - The Fall of the Bandit

Incredibly, the person standing by the door was none other than Lu Xiao Feng, not Three Eggs Lu, not Little Pig Lu, but Lu Xiao Feng. How could he suddenly appear out of thin air? Jin Jiu Ling almost did not believe his own very eyes, this was just quite simply, impossible.

So much so that Jin Jiu Ling asked a really stupid question.

"You should be at least 400 kilometers away now!"

"Apparently so!" Lu Xiao Feng replied.

"I had just received this message from Nan Hai!" Jin Jiu Ling looked down at the bamboo container in his hand.

"I know."

"You knew?"

"That pigeon was indeed trained by you, and it was you who gave it to Meng Wei. The brand and the paper that the letter was written on are all real. But this time the pigeon wasn't released by Meng Wei!"

Jin Jiu Ling did not understand.

"Did the letter say: 'Lu has passed here, heading west'?"

"How... how did you know?"

Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"Of course I would know, I wrote the letter!"

Jin Jiu Ling was even more shocked.

"You wrote it? When did you write it?"

"Two nights ago." Lu Xiao Feng smiled and explained. "Two nights ago, I went to Meng Wei to ask him to write a message to you, telling you to meet me at the Snake King's old headquarters. You should at least know that!"

Jin Jiu Ling nodded.

"When he was writing the message last night, I saw his handwriting. It wasn't exactly difficult to emulate!"

Because his handwriting was indeed too awkward, it is hard to copy good handwriting, but bad handwriting looks bad one way or another.

"When he went to release a pigeon, I helped myself to one of these containers and a sheet of paper that he wrote the letters in. After he went

back to bed, I went back and stole one of his pigeons too."

Jin Jiu Ling's face looked distinctively blue.

"That night, I gave the pigeon to a friend of mine in Nan Hai and asked him to release it today afternoon."

He broke out into a triumphant smile and explained. "Because I knew that as soon as you see me, you would find some excuse to make me leave so you would have the chance to kill First Madame Gong Sun."

"You knew that I would tell Meng Wei to wait and inform me about your whereabouts?" Jin Jiu Ling asked despite of himself.

"I have to go through Nan Hai to leave and Meng Wei is the Head Snake there, not to mention you have always been a very meticulous and careful man. If I wasn't far away, how could you make your move?"

"But this place...."

"This place is indeed quite secretive and remote." Lu Xiao Feng cut him off. "I would have had a tough time finding it myself."

"So led you here?"

"That pigeon."

Jin Jiu Ling was speechless again.

"In high winds, the bamboo tube would make a whistling sound. Starting at noon, I had waited on the rooftops. I knew that pigeon would have been able to find you. Luckily, my lightness kungfu isn't too shabby!"

Jin Jiu Ling's face went from blue to green. He looked back at First Madame Gong Sun, then at Lu Xiao Feng.

"Did you two plan this?"

"Surprised?" Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"When did you start getting suspicious about me?"

"I had only really started suspecting that it was you on the day the Snake King died!"

"Why?"

"Do you recall when we found his body, the lamps weren't lit on his pavilion?"

Jin Jiu Ling nodded but failed to see what was so significant about this point!

"If the lamps weren't lit, then that means that the Snake King died before night fall, which would mean that he was killed before he found it necessary to light the lamps!"

Jin Jiu Ling felt his entire body turn cold. He could have never suspected that this tiny little clue was the turning point of this whole case.

"If First Madame Gong Sun really had invited him to meet in the WestPark, then why would she go over to his place and kill him before hand?" Lu Xiao Feng continued. "That's why I knew right then and there that the person who killed the Snake King had to be someone else!"

"And you thought it could be me?"

"I wasn't sure, but what I was pretty sure of was that the Snake King was working for you!"

"Why?"

"Because only you could control him, because when he went looking for that map of the Palace for me, it was too easy, and the map was too detailed. A streetwalker or the boss of the underworld could not be that powerful, unless he was already in cahoots with the Warden of the Palace!"

Jin Jiu Ling's lips were ash white, his forehead was covered with cold sweat.

"The silk sash that you used to choke the Snake King to death was suppose to point towards First Madame Gong Sun, but instead it became her perfect alibi and exonerated her completely."

"Why?"

"Because when I fought with her, I had already cut the sashes that were tied to her swords in half. Those silk sashes aren't something you can find at a moment's notice, and in that time frame she never had a chance to find one!"

Jin Jiu Ling had nothing to say.

"One tiny hole can cause the whole dam to collapse," Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "Besides, there was more than just one hole in your plan!"

For the third time, Jin Jiu Ling asked: "Why?"

"Setting up those two rooms was a stroke of genius on your part, but you forgot one thing!"

"What would that be?"

"Everyone has a distinctive scent. Had those clothes really been worn by First Madame Gong Sun, they would retain a little bit of her scent."

"Quite a lot of people have said that I am indeed a very sweet smelling woman." First Madame Gong Sun coquettishly added.

"You were always trying to keep Hua Man Lou out of this matter, perhaps because you were afraid that he might realize this fact. But you could not have known that I had picked that up from him!" Lu Xiao Feng smiled and continued. "Now, when I look at something, I won't just be watching with my eyes, I would be smelling with my nose as well!"

"That why quite a lot of people have said he is like a hound!" First Madame Gong Sun joked.

"You purposefully made that message carrying wooden box and then purposefully got poisoned so as to make sure I went forth by myself, that was also another stroke of genius. But pity once again, you forgot something."

By now, all Jin Jiu Ling could do was listen.

"Meng Wei is a rough and tumble kind of a guy through and through, he doesn't even know Xiao Zhuan, how could he have possibly recognized those ancient writings on the box? Besides, after you were poisoned, he didn't seem that worried, wouldn't you say that was very odd as well?"

"On top of that, he has way too much money," First Madame Gong Sun added. "He could actually get his hands on 100,000 taels of silver on a whim!"

"I did the math, with his pay, if he did not eat anything, drink anything, or spend a single farthing on anything, he would still have needed about 50 or 60 years to save up 100,000 taels of silver!"

"Well, you really put some work into that abacus didn't you?" First Madame Gong Sun said with a smile.

"Even then, I was still not sure, because if Madame Xue said that the peony was done by a woman, then it must have been the work of a woman, so...."

"So what did you do?" Jin Jiu Ling finally could not control himself and asked.

"So I took out that piece of red satin and carefully inspected for a long time."

That piece of red satin was stolen by Si Kong Zhai Xing, was brought to Still Dusk Convent by Xue Bing, placed in front of the statue, but still finally ended up in Lu Xiao Feng's hands.

"I inspected it for a full 2 hours before I found your secret!"

"What did you find?"

"I found that the peony had one petal where the thread was not sewn as tightly as the others. It was embroidered in two layers, so if you unthreaded a layer, there would still be another layer!" He smiled and continued. "When other saw you sew this peony, you were actually unthreading it. That's how the peony can be the work of a woman while the Embroidery Bandit turn out to be a man!"

"Anything more?"

"Just one more thing, you shouldn't have kidnapped Xue Bing!"

"Why?" Jin Jiu Ling asked for a fourth time.

"Because I later found out that Xue Bing had recently become First Madame Gong Sun's Eighth Sister. Even if First Madame Gong Sun was the real Embroidery Bandit, she would never do any harm to her Eighth Sister!"

"How did you know she was my Eighth Sister?" First Madame Gong Sun inquired. "Even I couldn't figure that out!"

"Because of that hand!"

"What hand?" First Madame Gong Sun was confused.

"Sun Zhong's hand!" Lu Xiao Feng explained. "Xue Bing chopped off Sun Zhong's hand, but then that hand showed up in Xue Bing's room again. That hand had obviously not crawled there all by itself, and other than the sisters of the Red Shoes, nobody would go and bring back hands that they had cut off of other people!"

"So when you saw Third Sister's bag full of noses, you thought of that hand?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"She has only recently joined and had actually forgot that everyone of you had to bring back something every year," he continued. "Once she remembered, she went back and got that hand. But unfortunately for her she left in such a hurry that she forgot to take it with her again!"

He sighed and continued. "When I asked her how the hand had gotten in her room, she pretended to not know what I was talking about. Because she did not want me to find out the connection between you and her!"

"But you had already figured it out!"

"It was only until I heard you say 'Eighth Sister won't be coming', only then did I know that your Eighth Sister must have been her!"

"These reasons are all quite a bit of a stretch!" Jin Jiu Ling suddenly sneered.

"These reasons really are all quite a bit of a stretch, but to me, they are enough!" Lu Xiao Feng replied.

"Are they?"

"There are enough reasons, but not enough evidence."

"That's because you don't have a single piece of evidence."

"That's why I had to make you confess all of this yourself, that's why I had to go through with this 'doomed to death and back' plan!"

"Why?"

"Because I know that only when you know that your plan has succeeded, that First Madame Gong Sun was going to die for sure, only then would you tell the truth in front of her. That's why I had to put her in a certain death situation and make you think that she was as good as dead!"

"This plan was indeed quite effective, but I was the one who had to suffer the trials." First Madame Gong Sun commented with a pitiful smile. "I have never had to go through anything remotely like this in my life."

"But the most crucial part of this is that we can't let you find out about any of this, we can't risk you suspecting us to be in cahoots!" Lu Xiao Feng continued.

"But there is someone who was your accomplice among my sisters."

"Therefore we had to put on a little act in front of them!"

"Even now, they have no idea that I left because I wanted to, not because I had lost to you!"

Lu Xiao Feng broke out into a smile.

First Madame Gong Sun shot him a look.

"No need to smile." She warned. "One of these days, I will get my rematch, still three rounds, to see once and for all who's better, you or me!"

"Of course it's you, I'm just an idiot."

"You are indeed very stupid, even I thought so. But you still have one good trait!"

"I have a good trait?"

"Of course you do," First Madame Gong Sun playfully replied. "Sometimes, for no reasons what so ever, you would turn smart all of the sudden!"

"I find that very puzzling myself!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"It's not you that's puzzled, but others!" First Madame Gong Sun smiled and shot a look over at Jin Jiu Ling out of the corner of her eye. "Take this man here for example, he must be feeling quite puzzled right now trying to figure out how in the world did you get smart all of the sudden!"

Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

Jin Jiu Ling could not help but let out a long, drawn out sigh.

"I really did underestimate you!"

"Maybe I...." Lu Xiao Feng began to reply but Jin Jiu Ling cut him off.

"I had took you as a friend all this time, I thought you were a good man. I can't imagine that you would get in cahoots with the Embroidery Bandit and try to make me take the fall!"

Lu Xiao Feng stopped laughing as he looked at him in shock, as if he had never seen this man before.

"Pity that no matter what nasty lies you two say about me, it won't work!" Jin Jiu Ling coldly continued with a straight face. "I entered public service at age of 13 and in 30 years of work since have never done a single unlawful thing. No matter what you accuse me of, nobody will believe you!"

"But you just confess just now!"

"What did I confess to?"

Lu Xiao Feng seemed a little choked up. Even now, he still did not have a single piece of evidence.

Of course, Jin Jiu Ling saw this as well.

"Why would I confess to being the Embroidery Bandit? Who would be stupid enough to do that? If you two tell other people that, they would

laugh their teeth off!" He coldly continued. "Besides, from Yang Cheng to Nan Hai, every bounty hunter knows that First Madame Gong Sun is the Embroidery Bandit. Even if you two kill me right now, the government would still paste your likenesses to every corner of the world. You can't get away!"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Looks like you won another round." He pitifully smiled.

"Good always triumphs over evil, the web of justice has no leaks, the righteous path will last forever, so it would be best for you two if you just follow me to the court and turn yourselves in."

"Good always triumphs over evil, the righteous will last forever," Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "Didn't think you would actually understand these sayings."

"Of course I do."

"Well if you do, then you should know that no matter what kind of tricks you pull, it would all be useless!"

"I didn't..."

This time it was Lu Xiao Feng's turn to cut him off.

"You think that we are the only ones who heard this conversation?"

Jin Jiu Ling's expression changed but quickly recovered.

"I'm not deaf, if there was others around here, they couldn't have hid from me!"

"I know that your ear is very perceptive. The only reason you didn't notice me was because you were too pleased with yourself just then. Indeed, if I really did have people within 15 meters, they would not be able to hide from you!"

Jin Jiu Ling arrogantly snickered.

"And you also know that if someone was outside of 15 meters, then there would have been impossible for them to hear what you just said." But Lu Xiao Feng did not let Jin Jiu Ling reply before continuing. "Pity these men are different from normal people!"

"Oh?"

"These men's ears are even sharper than yours, although you can't hear them, they can hear you." Lu Xiao Feng's eyes seemed to glow as he continued, emphasizing every word. "Because they are all blind. Blind men's ears are always much more perceptive than a normal person's!"

Jin Jiu Ling's expression changed again.

Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"You can come out now!" He shouted.

In between his laughter, the sound of clanking roof tiles could be heard as three green shirted women, leading three blind men, jumped down from the roof top and walked in.

At first glance, all three women looked almost exactly the same. But upon careful inspection, one could tell that they were all in disguise. They were none other than the three shadows that flew out of the pavilion during the last round of Lu Xiao Feng's match against First Madame Gong Sun. Of the three blind men they led in, one had 3 scars across his purple colored face, another had very prominent cheek bones and had a very authoritative air about him, while the last one was an old man with a sickly looking complexion dressed in fancy silk clothing. When he saw these three men, Jin Jiu Ling felt his entire body go numb. Of course he recognized these three men. He had blinded all three of them, Chang Man Tian, Jiang Chong Wei, and Hua Yi Fan.

Jiang Chong Wei's expression was blue with rage.

"I have known you for several decades now, I never suspected you to be such a heartless bastard!"

"The web of justice has no leaks, if you really understood the meaning of that, why did you still do this?" Chang Man Tian asked.

Hua Yi Fan's entire body was shaking in rage. He opened his mouth to say something, but could not. Looking at these men, Jin Jiu Ling involuntarily began to step back, stepping back all the way to the wall before collapsing into a chair, seemingly incapable of standing back up

again.

"You probably can't figure out how these three gentlemen could suddenly show up!" First Madame Gong Sun said.

Indeed, Jin Jiu Ling could not have even dreamt that they would.

"Within my sisters, my Fourth and Seventh sisters were the ones without any suspicion. Therefore I had already instructed them, along with my personal maid Lan-Er, to split up and invite Warden Jian, Escort Chang, and Mister Hua here as soon as possible!"

"We figured that the three of them would make it here today at the latest, so I had also arranged to meet them this morning!" Lu Xiao Feng finished.

One of the women in green was giggling: "Lu Xiao Feng went chasing after that pigeon, and I went chasing after him. Once I knew where this was, we brought them all here."

Her laughter was pretty like a bell, she was none other than the girl in red.

"But we also knew that your eyes and ears are very sharp, so we didn't dare risking getting close," another woman in green continued. "What you said, we didn't hear any of it. Fortunately, they heard every word of it!"

Her voice was sweet and gentle, she was none other than First Madame

Gong Sun's Fourth Sister, Ou Yang Qing.

Jin Jiu Ling did not move, nor say anything. Only now was he truly out of words.

"Good always triumphs over evil, the righteous will last forever," maybe it was only now that he truly understood the meaning of those words. The girl in red and Ou Yang Qing had walked over to either side of the bed and helped First Madame Gong Sun sit up. Suddenly, both of them frowned at the same time as a few wrinkles appeared on the ridges of their noses.

Amazingly, First Madame Gong Sun blushed. She quietly whispered something into their ears. Both of them started to laugh. The girl in red could not help but once again double over in laughter, she was laughing so hard that she was almost out of breath. Indeed, they had the right to laugh, and the reason to laugh. Only those who have a clear self-consciousness could laugh, only those who have no guilt in their heart could be so carefree. The one who could not laugh right now was Jin Jiu Ling.

"I know not only do you know how to sew flowers, you can sew blind men, two pricks and there's one blind man." Chang Man Tian viciously declared. "But what can you sew now?"

"Even if you can sew a pair of wings for yourself, you won't be able to get out of the web of the law!" Jiang Chong Wei warned.

"The only thing that he should sew right now, is an especially huge coffin so that both Meng Wei and Lu Shao Hua can accompany him in it." The girl in red joked in between her laughter.

"I still have to remind you one thing," Lu Xiao Feng added. "It's probably best for you not to wait for the two of them to come here with your disciples in an effort to save you!"

Jin Jiu Ling did not move, nor did he speak.

"Right now, Meng Wei is still in Nan Hai waiting to inform you of my whereabouts." Lu Xiao Feng explained. "But Lu Shao Hua has fallen ill, gravely ill!"

"Rumors say that he's caught a very strange illness indeed!" The girl in red laughed and said. "That pair of greedy, always asking other people for money, hands of his have suddenly vanished!"

Jin Jiu Ling finally let out a long sigh.

"One wrong move, and the whole game is lost." He said. "Didn't think that I, Jin Jiu Ling, would have a today!"

Jiang Chong Wei sighed as well.

"Actually, I knew you would eventually end up like his. You love to spend too much, loved to enjoy life too much!"

"Others think that you don't have to spend money on women, but only I know that to a woman like me, there is only money and nothing else." Ou Yang Qing declared. "Even if you are the reincarnation of Fan An or Song

Yu, you still have to have money to get in the door."

Lu Xiao Feng laughed despite of himself. He knew that she was telling the truth firsthand.

"But you are an exception," Ou Yang Qing shot him a mean look before playfully declaring. "You are the only exception in this world!"

"Oh?"

"Because you are not a man, you are nothing but a four eye browed bastard!" Ou Yang Qing's expression dropped as she coldly explained.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed. One truly cannot cross a woman like Ou Yang Qing. If you just cross her once, she will remember it for the rest of her life.

"I only have one last thing to ask you!" First Madame Gong Sun suddenly interrupted.

"Ask me?" Jin Jiu Ling turned towards her.

First Madame Gong Sun nodded.

"You better tell me now, where is Xue Bing?"

Jin Jiu Ling suddenly let out a little laugh, but did not answer.

"Are you planning on using her to threaten us?" First Madame Gong Sun was getting angry. "Don't you know what my methods are?"

Jin Jiu Ling ignored her and instead turned to Lu Xiao Feng.

"The Master of White Cloud Castle's sword skill are second to none, yet he could not stop praising you, calling you a genius of martial arts of a level that he had never encountered before in his life."

As he slowly spoke, Lu Xiao Feng quietly listened, knowing that he was getting somewhere.

"First Madame Gong Sun, with all her disguises, changes, and tricks, with her best in the world sword and sash skills, still lost to you!"

"Stop kissing up to him, it won't work anymore!" First Madame Gong Sun coldly snickered.

But Jin Jiu Ling continued to ignore her and kept his stare on Lu Xiao Feng.

"My elder martial brother Bitter Gourd had always not cared much for anyone in the world, yet he treat you differently. Because he believes the clamp of your two fingers is a skill that will never be matched."

Lu Xiao Feng quietly sighed. He suddenly thought about how bad Master Gourd would feel when he finds out his only martial brother

ending up like this.

"Huo Xiu, Huo Tian Qing, Yan Tie Shan, they are all the master among masters in the world, yet they all lost in your hands. It's quite obvious if you are not the best martial art master in the world, you are not that far off." Jin Jiu Ling sighed again before continuing. "But I'm nothing more than a mere bounty hunter within the Six Doors. A person like me is not worth a farthing in the eyes of those masters of the martial world!"

"What are you trying to say?" Lu Xiao Feng finally asked.

"I only want to just have a duel with a martial arts master such as yourself, to see who is really better!" Jin Jiu Ling plainly answered.

"For all intensive purposes, you are a captured criminal," First Madame Gong Sun replied with a sneer. "What gives you the right to negotiate a duel?"

Jin Jiu Ling did not even look in her direction.

"If I lose, not only would I willingly turn myself in, I would immediately tell you where Xue Bing is!"

Lu Xiao Feng's eyes flickered, he was clearly tempted by the offer.

"But what if you lose?" Jin Jiu Ling inquired.

"What do you propose?"

"If you lose, I won't ask you to let me go!"

"Even if he lets you go, I won't!" First Madame Gong Sun viciously protested.

But Jin Jiu Ling did not seem to even hear her.

"If you, by some chance, lose to me, I only request one thing."

"Do tell!"

"I only request that you would protect my reputation and not let this leak out. I think on my elder martial brother's behalf, that wouldn't be too hard on you!"

Lu Xiao Feng did not answer immediately. Instead he slowly walked over to the window and pushed it open. The setting sun's rays colored the sky, it was already dusk.

"Don't fall for his tricks," Chang Man Tian suddenly warned. "This person is cunning like a fox, he must have another trick up his sleeve!"

"The level of his kungfu was much higher than what I thought was possible." Jiang Chong Wei commented.

"I have been making a living in the martial world ever since I was a kid, have fought in hundreds and thousands of fights, suffered scores of

injuries.” Chang Man Tian stated. “My kungfu might not be strong, but I have more than enough experience. But even I could not tell just how good his skills are, I couldn’t even last one move against him!”

Hua Yi Fan suddenly sighed too.

“Indeed, this man’s kungfu skill is almost beyond measure. In the past I have sparred again the Wooden Taoist and the Ancient Pine Hermit. But from what I have seen, his skill is higher than either one of them!”

Lu Xiao Feng did not seem to hear a word they said. In the dusk covered sky, a row of wild geese were flying past for the Winter.

“It was just the dead of summer, in a blink of an eye it’s turned into Autumn.” Lu Xiao Feng mumbled to himself. “Time passes so quickly... so quickly...”

Jin Jiu Ling sighed as well.

“Time is like the water in the river, once it’s gone it’s never coming back. Thinking back to when we first met, it has been almost 10 years now, but how many decades are there in life?”

“First Madame Gong Sun hasn’t fully recovered. Because we were afraid that you might see through our scheme, the drug she took was real!”

“I know it’s not fake!”

"At this moment, she probably only has half of her strength and fighting ability back. Add on top of that her Fourth and Seventh Sister and me, there would be no way in the world you could get away, no matter how powerful you are!"

"I know!"

"But if I do indeed duel against you and lose to you, even if I survive, I would surely be injured!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "Besides, you know full well how I would act if I really did agree to a duel against you. If I lose, I would not attack you again no matter what!"

"I have always knew that even though you are not a gentleman, you are still a real man!"

"That's why if I lost, they might not be able to stop you. If you can escape out of here today, there is a very good chance you would never be caught and get away with this!"

"Well if you know what he intends to do, then why are you talking all this bullshit to him? Are you really an idiot?" Ou Yang Qing had to cut in.

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly let out a little laugh.

"I'm not talking bullshit!"

"Then what is it?" Ou Yang Qing sneered.

"I'm merely telling him that since I can't afford to lose to him, then if I do agree to a duel, it means that I am sure of winning!"

"You are prepared to agree to the duel?" Ou Yang Qing's expression changed dramatically.

"Well if I'm not going to agree to a duel, then doesn't all of what I just said become bullshit?" Lu Xiao Feng nonchalantly replied.

Jin Jiu Ling shot up from his chair.

"Excellent! Lu Xiao Feng indeed is Lu Xiao Feng!"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"And again, I hear that sentence!"

"Where do you propose to fight this duel?" Jin Jiu Ling inquired.

"Here!"

"Here? Inside the room?"

"No place like this place, I don't want to give you an extra opportunity to escape!"

Jin Jiu Ling threw his head back and let out a hearty laughter.

"Excellent, excellent indeed!"

He had suddenly regained his energy, it was almost as if he had changed completely into another person.

"What are you going to use for a weapon?" Lu Xiao Feng asked.

"Obviously something you can't clamp those fingers of yours down on!" Jin Jiu Ling joked.

"You have already made preparations?"

"I had always had this hunch, it's as if I knew that I would one day exchange blows against you!"

In the corner of the room was a closet, Jin Jiu Ling walked over and opened it. Incredibly, inside the closet was a spear, a sabre, two swords, a pair of hooks, a pair of halberds, a whip, an ax, a spear with a hook on the side, and one very peculiar somewhat whip like, somewhat club like iron flail. This closet was obviously weapon storage.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Looks like you really are prepared for anything at anytime, anywhere!"

"I'm a very careful man, I never do anything I'm not sure of!" Jin Jiu Ling smiled.

"You don't fight duels you are not sure you can win?"

"I have yet to lose once to anyone in all my life!" Jin Jiu Ling nonchalantly replied. This was not a lie.

"But I also know for a fact that you have yet to lose to anyone in all your life as well!" Jin Jiu Ling stated as he stared at Lu Xiao Feng.

"There is a first time for everything!" Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"Good one!" Jin Jiu Ling agreed as he reached out and grabbed his weapon of choice, he chose the heavy flail that weighed at least 70 kilograms.

First Madame Gong Sun's expression changed dramatically.

"All of you get out, wait outside and guard the door and windows!" She gravely commanded.

"All of you" includes her sisters as well as Chang Man Tian, Jiang Chong Wei, and Hua Yi Fan. She knew what kind of power the flail had. This room might not be small, but it was far from being large. Once this weapon is put in use, anybody or anything in the room could be smashed to bits at any moment!

Even Lu Xiao Feng was slightly shocked. This man's weapon was supposed to be a feather light sewing needle, yet now it suddenly

became this almost 100 kilogram flail. Could his kungfu really have reached such a place that he could wield both heavy and light weapons with equal ease?

"What are you going to use for your weapon?" Jin Jiu Ling was already asking.

Lu Xiao Feng quietly thought about it for a bit. He suddenly noticed that in the corner of the closet was a pouch of sewing needles. So he chose a single solitary sewing needle!

Jin Jiu Ling burst out laughing.

"Great stuff! I'm using this giant iron flail, you are using that sewing needle. If anyone else saw this, they would surely think that you are the Embroidery Bandit!"

"I might not be the Embroidery Bandit, but I still know how to sew!" Lu Xiao Feng casually replied.

"But can you sew blind men?" Jin Jiu Ling's eyes flickered.

"No!" Lu Xiao Feng's eyes began to glow like the sword blades as he slowly emphasized every word. "Only dead men!"

First Madame Gong Sun did not leave the room. Instead she stood silently in the corner of the room. Her face displayed no emotions, but inside she was racked with worry. This room is too small and Jin Jiu Ling's weapon of choice packed too much power. Once he begin his attacks, Lu

Xiao Feng might not even have a place to dodge!

The flail was about 1 and 1/2 meters in length, the sewing needle was only about 3 centimeters long. The weapons they picked could not be anymore different, one was overtly reliant on power, the other overtly reliant on speed, one was extremely heavy, the other extremely light, softness could nullify hardness, but speed might not defeat power, and lightness could not possibly hope to counter heaviness! Judging strictly on weapons, Lu Xiao Feng was obviously at a disadvantage.

"Could you please leave the room as well?" Jin Jiu Ling suddenly requested.

"Are you afraid that I might ambush you from behind?" First Madame Gong Sun sneered.

"I know you are not the kind of person who would do that," Jin Jiu Ling smiled. "But having you in the room is still a threat to me!"

First Madame Gong Sun hesitated and looked over at Lu Xiao Feng at the corner of her eye.

"You can see us fighting outside just as well!" Lu Xiao Feng matter of factly told her.

First Madame Gong Sun sighed and finally left the room, but not before she turned around and shouted: "I am about 80% recovered, even if you lose, he still won't get away!"

Lu Xiao Feng let out a little laugh.

“Don’t worry, I don’t plan on letting him get away!”

Jin Jiu Ling smiled.

“This room is the death ground, I’m thinking about doing this ‘doomed to death and back’ thing as well!”

Before he even finished talking, the flail in his hand began to move!

The actual weight of the flail was 87 kilograms. In his hands, a flail weighing 87 kilograms seemed light as a feather. The moves that he was using were quick, nimble, and fast, just like how one would use a sewing needle. Just this first move contained within it 6 or 7 different variations, yet it did not create any sound as it swished through the air. Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

Only now did he know that Jin Jiu Ling was a person who did not reveal himself to anyone and that his martial arts skill was truly beyond measure. Only now did he believe that the Wooden Taoist, Ancient Pine Hermit, Master Bitter Gourd, and the rest of them indeed were not a match for him. His mind turned fast, his movements were even faster. He took a quick and gentle step back and stabbed out the needle with his palm facing down.

“Pshhhhh”! The point of the needle pierced through the air like an arrow shot out of a bow!

The needle might be light as a feather, but in his hands, it seemed to weigh a ton. His moves were hard, fierce, and pressing, just as if he was the one using the flail. In a blink of an eye the two men exchanged over 10 moves each. The heavy and powerful weapon was used with fast and nimble moves instead! The light and weak weapon was used with hard and pressing moves instead!

The spectacle of this battle was not something that could be described by anyone. The faces of Jiang Chong, Chang Man Tian, and Hua Yi Fan were all covered with the expression of shock. Even though they could not see, they could still hear it.

There was only the sound of the needle piercing through the air coming from the room, but not a sound of the large flail could be heard. Even though they were all experienced masters, none of them could imagine how this could be. All that could be heard was the constant “psss, psshhh” of the sewing needle piercing through the air faster and faster but also constantly moving, on the left side one moment, on the right another, much faster than anything any fly could hope to achieve, nevermind any normal human.

Hua Yi Fan sighed.

“No wonder the Wooden Taoist always talks about how Lu Xiao Feng is a rare genius only comes along once several generations. It is not an exaggeration!”

“But Jin Jiu Ling is even more frightening!” Chang Man Tian replied with a grave expression.

"Oh?"

"Lu Xiao Feng's movements are this fast, attacks are this pressing, and yet Jin Jiu Ling's huge flail could not be heard at all despite being put into full use against him. Isn't that even more unimaginable?"

He knew Jin Jiu Ling was using the flail because he had asked Ou Yang Qing earlier. His experience in combat was something that the privileged and respected Hua Yi Fan could not hope to match, hence his analysis was much more accurate than Hua Yi Fan's.

Hua Yi Fan thought in silence for a long time before slowly replying: "I have long heard that Escort Chang's experience in combat and fighting was something that few could match. Seems like this is also not an exaggeration either!"

"Woom!" As soon as he had finished his sentence, a sudden gust of wind picked up like a dragon shooting out of a cloud.

"Jin Jiu Ling has changed his tactics!" Chang Man Tian's expression changed dramatically.

Jin Jiu Ling's moves and techniques did indeed change, it changed into a fast and furious, hard and pressing, yield for nothing style! The room was suddenly and completely covered in the wind of the flail, leaving almost no place of refuge for any human to stand.

Jiang Chong Wei's expression changed as well.

"Could he have been testing Lu Xiao Feng all that time and is only now employing his full power?" He inquired.

"But Lu Xiao Feng is not holding back anymore either!" Chang Man Tian observed.

"Why do you say that?" Jiang Chong Wei asked.

"He's wielding his flail with such power and speed, if it was someone else, he would have surely been forced out of the room by now. But we don't hear anything from Lu Xiao Feng, obviously he could still manage and is waiting for his chance to strike!"

Ou Yang Qing was looking at him with a look of pure admiration. This blind man was seeing things even more accurately than anybody else could see with their own eyes! Lu Xiao Feng was indeed still able to manage. His entire body have seemed to have turned into something entirely formless and shapeless, as if he could turn and flex in any direction at will. No matter how Jin Jiu Ling's flail attacked him, he would always dodge out of the way as if it was nothing.

There were instances where the flail had obviously cornered him into a losing situation, yet with a suddenly twist of his body, he would dissipate all the danger. First Madame Gong Sun's face was full of worry at the beginning, but now she could finally breath a sigh of relief.

Chang Man Tian suddenly sighed.

"I had thought that Lu Xiao Feng was not a match at the beginning, but

now Jin Jiu Ling has no chance to win!"

"Why do you say that?" Jiang Chong Wei asked again.

"Jin Jiu Ling is now using his hard and powerful moves, but power must diminish, hard can't last forever, the rate at which he is tiring must be much faster than that of Lu Xiao Feng's!" His face was aglow as he slowly continued. "When he could no longer control the flail as he wishes, he would begin smashing up the room. That would signify that his strength is almost all gone. That's when Lu Xiao Feng can begin his counter-attack!"

At this moment, a crashing sound could be heard coming from within the room, followed in quick succession with another serious of other objects being smashed.

"He has just smashed the table!" Ou Yang Qing involuntarily declared.

"Boom!"

"Now he's smashed the bed too!" The girl in red said.

A smile crept up on Chang Man Tian's face.

"Looks like you are about to get back you collection of paintings and writings!"

Hua Yi Fan's face was full of joy as well.

"Don't forget your silver!"

"Kaboom!" An earth shattering explosion shook all of them at that moment.

Jin Jiu Ling's forehead was covered in sweat and the speed with which he swung his flail steadily slowed. He also knew that Lu Xiao Feng was getting ready to counter-attack.

He took two steps forward and swung out the flail. Lu Xiao Feng took two steps back and was just about to use those steps as a spring to leap into attack. But unexpectedly, Jin Jiu Ling suddenly let go of his grip and the flail, with the air around it swirling and howling like a tornado, flew towards Lu Xiao Feng.

Nobody in the world could possibly hope to take on the power of this toss directly. All Lu Xiao Feng could do was quickly dodge out of the way.

"Kaboom!" The earth shook as the flail actually smashed a huge hole in the wall of the room. The force of the flail was not spent as it kept on flying forward even further. Jin Jiu Ling borrowing the reaction to the force of toss to his body, followed the flail through the wall! Even Lu Xiao Feng was caught off guard by this move. All he saw was a shadow of a man flashing by his eyes and Jin Jiu Ling had vanished.

"Peng!" The flail smashed into the wall encircling the yard and fell onto the ground, but Jin Jiu Ling had already jumped over the wall. First Madame Gong Sun almost panicked as she was just about to go chase after him when suddenly another shadow passed right in front of her: Lu

Xiao Feng.

"Such incredible speed!" Chang Man Tian sighed in disbelief.

First Madame Gong Sun sighed.

"If it wasn't for the fact that I'm not fully recovered, I could let you hear my speed as well!" She said with a rather disappointed smile.

She did not chase after Jin Jiu Ling. With Lu Xiao Feng chasing, there was no need for her to go as well.

"Don't worry First Madame, Jin Jiu Ling's strength is almost completely drained, and his lightness kungfu is no match for Lu Xiao Feng to begin with, he can't get away!" Chang Man Tian replied.

First Madame Gong Sun finally broke out into a smile.

"Indeed, there is not that many people who can match up against Lu Xiao Feng's lightness kungfu!"

By now Jin Jiu Ling also understood that Lu Xiao Feng's lightness kungfu was much more frightening than he could have ever imagined. He had a head start as well as the element of surprise, but within 7 or 8 hops, Lu Xiao Feng had almost already caught up.

The distance between them was originally more than 30 meters, but now it was no more than 15 meters. This gap could be covered in maybe just one more hop. The strange thing was Jin Jiu Ling did not seem too worried. Before him laid a small woods, within it was some gazebo and pavilions along with some sporadic flowers and bushes.

“Lu Xiao Feng is the Embroidery Bandit! Somebody slow him down, quick!” Jin Jiu Ling suddenly shouted.

The shout had not completely died down before 4 shadows flew out from within the pavilion, they were none other than Second Madame, Third Madame, the nun in green, and Jiang Qing Xia. The 4 of them swooped around like swallows with the nun in green and Third Madame out in front.

“Whoop!” The whip in Third Madame’s hand had latched itself around Lu Xiao Feng’s leg.

Lu Xiao Feng was so concentrated on chasing Jin Jiu Ling that he had actually not been able to dodge this move. Third Madame gave the whip a good tug and he almost fell.

By now Jin Jiu Ling had already put almost another 20 meters between him and Lu Xiao Feng, he was about to get away. The nun in green’s sword flashed its cold flash as it struck towards Lu Xiao Feng’s chest.

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly reached out with his two fingers and clamped down on the blade of the sword. The nun in green simply felt her wrist suddenly go numb and lost her grip on her sword.

Still with the blade caught between his fingers, Lu Xiao Feng flicked the sword out. Nobody could describe the speed and power of this flick!

Nobody could imagine it! Nobody would even believe it. Even the phrase "lightning fast" could not describe one millionth of the speed of this sword!

This sword was like the light. As soon as you lit the lamp, light would have already reached every corner of the room.

The sword left his hand, a flash, and the blade had arrived at the back of Jin Jiu Ling's heart!

Jin Jiu Ling suddenly heard a really strange sound, a sound that he had never heard of.

Only then did he feel a wave of pain through his heart, a pain as if his heart had just broke.

He looked down, and at once saw a burst of blood shoot out from his heart. Only after the blood shot out did he finally see the blade that had pierced through his chest.

When he saw the blade, he had already collapsed! But he was not dead! This strike was too fast, faster than even death!

He could still see Lu Xiao Feng flying over to him -- Third Madame's whip had already been clipped in half by Lu Xiao Feng's fingers.

Lu Xiao Feng reached Jin Jiu Ling and sat him up.

"Xue Bing! Where is she?" He shouted.

Jin Jiu Ling stared back into his eyes, stared back with an unique yet cruel hint of laughter in his eyes.

"I'm going to see her now," he whispered. "But you'd have to wait a long long time before you can see her. A long long...."

His voice suddenly stopped, his heart suddenly stopped too.

His eyes were still full of that cruel and villainous laughter, as if he just saw Xue Bing....

Epilogue

Lu Xiao Feng was drunk. Because he needed to. He must.

"I'm going to see her now. But you'd have to wait a long long time before you can see her. A long long...."

He understood what Jin Jiu Ling meant, how could he not want to be drunk? Even though he was incredibly drunk, he was not asleep, but was still listening to First Madame Gong Sun's explanation to her sisters!

"Lu Xiao Feng is not an idiot. I knew he wasn't an idiot from the very beginning, I believed that he would have been able to see through Jin Jiu Ling's evil plans!"

"But I wasn't sure!"

"Even though I wasn't sure, I still had to somehow uncover Jin Jiu Ling's plans, nobody can be allowed to do that to me!"

"And I had to find out who his accomplice was, I can't let someone like this stay among my sisters, just like I can't let a sand stay in my eye."

"So I purposefully led Lu Xiao Feng to our meeting place, because I hoped to find an opportunity to tell him what I thought and hope that the two of us can work together to catch the real Embroidery Bandit."

"But I could not just come out and say it, because I know one of you was Jin Jiu Ling's accomplice!"

"I was just having trouble finding an opportunity when Lu Xiao Feng gave me one!" "He wanted to have a drinking contest with me."

"I suddenly realized what he wanted, so I immediately agreed to it!"

"When he was just about drunk, he did find an opportunity and whispered two sentences to me. Did any of you notice?"

"He said: 'Follow me, I know you are not the Embroidery Bandit!'"

"So I left with him!"

"But in order to keep this from the spy, we still had to continue the act. So we had two more rounds!"

"When the final round began, I secretly signaled Fourth Sister and Seventh Sister to follow me in, because I know that only the two of them are without a doubt innocent. Because only the two of them are still virgins!"

Ou Yang Qing, the prostitute who lives in a brothel, was a virgin? Even Lu Xiao Feng had to whip his head up and look at her in shock and surprise before quickly putting his head back down again.

First Madame Gong Sun continued.

"I instructed them, along with Lan-Er, to immediately split up and go find Jiang Chong Wei, Hua Yi Fan, and Chang Man Tian!"

"That spy would surely think that I was trying to bait Lu Xiao Feng away and would not suspect anything was amiss!"

"After I left with Lu Xiao Feng, we immediately found a remote place to discuss and compare what we suspected and what we knew!"

"That was when we decided upon that 'doomed to death and back' plan!"

Everyone was quiet, nobody spoke up.

"At the end when Jin Jiu Ling was trying to escape, he obviously already knew that you all had arrived at Yang Cheng, that's why he went that route."

That little wood was their meeting place in Yang Cheng.

First Madame Gong Sun's eyes were like a pair of piercing blades as she scanned over the faces of Second Madame, Third Madame, the nun in green, and Jiang Qing Xia.

"So that spy must be among the 4 of you!" She coldly continued.

Second Madame and Third Madame's face were completely devoid of

emotions, but Jiang Qing Xia's face was already deathly pale.

"Fifth Sister Jiang should have been the most suspicious of all, because she was the only one who would understand the layout and security of the Royal Palace and was the only one who could get close enough to Jiang Chong Wei to steal his keys," First Madame Gong Sun declared. She paused and broke out into a smile. "But Lu Xiao Feng had convinced me otherwise. Because he knew that Jin Jiu Ling and Jiang Chong Wei were good friends and could get close to Jiang Chong Wei himself without the help of Jiang Qing Xia. Besides, if Fifth Sister was his accomplice, then he would have never sent Si Kong Zhai Xing to take that piece of red satin to Still Dusk Convent."

Jiang Qing Xia looked over at the practically passed out Lu Xiao Feng with eyes overflowing with gratitude.

"Sixth Sister is also quite worthy of suspicion, because despite being committed to Buddhism, I have recently discovered that she has not been able to protect her body like a treasure!"

The nun in green's face initially blushed, but soon turned a deathly pale as well.

"But then I found out who her secret lover is -- you don't need to ask me who he is, all that you need to know is that he's not Jin Jiu Ling. I know what kind of a person Sixth Sister is, if she already has a lover, she would never have gotten together with Jin Jiu Ling. So it could not be her either!"

The nun in green looked down, tears suddenly appearing in her eyes.

Yet Second and Third Sister still sat there, their faces totally devoid of emotions, neither saying a word.

First Madame Gong Sun suddenly turned onto Third Madame, the look in her eyes as sharp as the sharpest blades.

"You were completely free of suspicion, but you should not have attacked Lu Xiao Feng when he had Seventh Sister as a hostage, forcing Lu Xiao Feng into a fight against us. Furthermore, you definitely should not have made such a lethal attack while Lu Xiao Feng was chasing Jin Jiu Ling!" Her expression suddenly dropped. "Second Madame! You know who the spy is, why are you still sitting there?"

Second Madame was still sitting there, but her silver sabre was now in hand. Suddenly with a backward thrust, she stabbed towards Third Madame's waist. This was a lethal strike. But Third Madame did not try to dodge at all, as if she was completely willing and fully prepared to take this blow!

But it was at this moment that the chopsticks in First Madame Gong Sun's hand flew out. One of them knocked away Second Madame's sabre while the other one sealed her pressure point. Second Madame's entire body froze, as if she had suddenly turned into stone.

First Madame looked at her and slowly began to talk: "Actually, I knew it was you a long time ago. To fund Jin Jiu Ling's spending habit, you already lost quite a lot of money. You knew that I would find out sooner or later, so you had to kill me. And after I die, only you would be able to take my place!"

On her frozen face, Second Madame's forehead was covered with numerous giant beads of sweat.

"But we are still sisters, so as long as you show a little bit of remorse and could admit to your mistakes, I was prepared to completely forgive and forget what you did!" First Madame Gong Sun let out a long, drawn out sigh. "But you shouldn't have made such a vicious move against Third Sister, obviously not only were you not remorseful for what you have done, but was prepared to let Third Sister take the fall and die in your place, you...."

She did not continue but instead walked up and unsealed Second Madame's pressure point with her hand.

"Go, leave!" She gravely instructed. "I just hope that after you leave, you can give me a resolution!"

Second Madame did not leave, instead she stared back at First Madame Gong Sun, her eyes filled with a hopeless fear.

She knew that she had no other options left. The silver sabre had landed on the table. She picked it up, and suddenly brought it up against her neck.

But this time her sabre was knocked down again, this time it was Lu Xiao Feng who knocked it down.

Lu Xiao Feng, in his somewhat drunk but not quite drunk stupor, waved

his hand and knocked down her sabre.

"Such a beautiful hour, such a wonderful party, why are you still trying to kill somebody?" He mumbled.

"I..." Second Madame bit her lip. "I'm not trying to kill anybody, I just want to kill myself?"

Lu Xiao Feng laughed, it was an earnest, but forced laughter.

"Aren't you somebody?"

Second Madame was startled.

Lu Xiao Feng continued to mumble on.

"If you are already wrong, then why go and do more wrong? The heart has died, why must the person die too? There's enough hatred out there, why bother adding more worries? Enough blood has been shed, why shed more?"

Second Madame stared at him for a long time. She suddenly laid her head down on the table and began to cry, cry with all of her broken heart.

First Madame Gong Sun looked over at Lu Xiao Feng and suddenly broke out into a smile.

"Alright, I'll listen to you one more time. But...."

Lu Xiao Feng cut her off.

"All that's needed to say have been said, why say anything more? The man is drunk, why stay any longer?...."

He shakely stood up and was slowly, gingerly making his way towards the door!

But First Madame Gong Sun blocked him.

"You are going now? Really?"

"There isn't a party in the world that must disperse, why not now? Those who has to leave will eventually leave, why not now?"

"Where are you going?"

"Since I'm leaving anyways, why must you ask?"

First Madame Gong Sun stared into his eyes.

"Since I already asked, why must you not tell me?" She playfully answered.

Lu Xiao Feng laughed, laughed heartily.

"Actually, I didn't need to ask, and you didn't need to answer, because where you are going, is also where I'm going!"

Lu Xiao Feng's suddenly flipped open his eyes.

"You know where I'm headed?"

"The two most famous swordsman in the martial world in the last 300 years is about to have a duel on top of Mount Zi Jin." First Madame Gong Sun smiled. "This duel will not only shake the world, but will be talked about for ages to come, how could I miss it?"

"You know about that?"

"I also know that the date of their duel is not the First, but the 15th. Jin Jiu Ling told you the First because he was trying to make you leave!"

"The 15th? The 15th of August? The Mid-Autumn's Festival?"

First Madame Gong Sun nodded and began to slowly hum a tune.

"Night of full moon, peak of Zi Jin, a sword from the west, an outer heaven angel...."

Lu Xiaofeng Book 3: Before and After the Duel

[决战前后 Juezhan Qianhou]

Written by Gu Long

Translated by Moinllieon

Chapter 1 - Urgent Message from a Strange Man

Autumn. The maple on the mountains have already turned into various shades of red, the glint of the road was now covered by a layer of white. The dead of Autumn was approaching.

The 13th of September. Just before dawn. Li Yan Bei walked out of office number 12 of his 30 offices as he made his way quickly down the still fog covered street. The jug of Bamboo Green and an hour worth of fooling around did not seem to have any tiring effect on him.

He well over 2 meters tall with a huge and strong build that was brimming with expectant energy. On that serious, dark browed, sharp eyed, eagle-nosed face of his was always an expression that was bordering on cruelty, just like that of an ancient leopard that had just leapt out of the bushes.

Anybody, no matter who he or she might be, would have a little bit of respect and fear when they come across him, and he would never carry himself lightly either.

Even ten years ago, he was already one of the most powerful man in this ancient city. A group of men followed him about 5 meters behind him, seemingly having to run just to keep up with him. Within this group of men was the head and the individual escorts of the 3 biggest escort services in all of the capital city, as well as the heads of the underground organizations within the cities just outside of the capital, not to mention the wardens and bosses of the most successful businesses and loan

sharks within the city.

There were also several people who had settled down in the city more than 10 years ago but about whose background nobody had any clues about.

They were all rich and successful middle aged men, and none of them wanted to leave the warmth of their home to walk about on this bitterly cold street this early in the day. But they had to make a walk like this every morning.

Because Li Yan Bei particularly liked to walk along this set path for at least an hour every morning before dawn. This place could practically be called his kingdom. During this walk, his head would always be particularly sharp and his assessments would always be particularly accurate. He liked to have his most trusted men following right behind him so he could give them instructions on the fly. Besides, this had been a habit of his for many years now. Just like the morning court that the Emperor holds, it does not matter if you like it or not, you could not miss it.

Ever since the Head Escort of the "World Shaking Escort", "Golden Sabre" Feng Kun, was dragged by him out of his bed and into a frozen river one particularly cold morning, nobody has missed one of these walks even once.

The light of the morning sun have not yet arisen, the wind still carried with it the chilling fragrance of the night, the branches on the trees on the side of the road had long been stripped bare of leaves, and the dew on the fallen leaves had already turned into a layer of thin Autumn frost.

Li Yan Bei's fists were tight as he had already walked from the outer walls of the city all the way to the center of the city just outside of the front gate.

"Sun Chong!" He suddenly yelled out. Immediately, a middle aged man in a gentry outfit and a slight whisker came running out among the men behind him and caught up to him. This was one of the best and most famous men under the command of Li Yan Bei, none other than the head of the "Hall of Satisfaction", the same hall whose weapons making was known throughout all of China.

"Did I not instruct you 15 years ago to never ever take Da Zong's business again?" Li Yan Bei asked with a grave voice. He did not slow down and wait for him to catch up, nor did he even look at him.

"Yes, sir."

"Then why is it that last night, you sold 66 sabres, 50 swords, and all of the bow and arrows from your weapon's arsenal?"

Sun Chong's head dipped as his expression dropped. Obviously, he did not think that Li Yan Bei could have found out about this so soon.

"This deal's intake was huge, practically paying for itself," he stammered, "besides...."

"Besides, business is still just business, right?" Li Yan Bei sneered.

Sun Chong did not answer but instead only held his head even lower.

Li Yan Bei's fists were even tighter as the look of anger appeared on his face.

"Do you know who is the man behind all those purchases?" He suddenly asked.

Sun Chong hesitantly shook his head. But his eyes were sneaking peeks at the surrounding. At this time, they had just made their way onto a very narrow street with cherry trees on the side that was off angle with the other streets. The shops and vendors on the side of the street were not yet open. But at this precise moment, two huge covered horse drawn carts charged out of the narrow alleys on either side of the street and cut them off in the middle of the street.

Next, the black cloth covering the cart were suddenly lifted as well -- revealing about a dozen men in black on both carts, each with a bow in hand, each of the bows already drawn in full, each with an arrow aimed at Li Yan Bei. Sun Chong had wanted to jump onto a cart, but Li Yan Bei had already grabbed his wrist.

His face suddenly turned deadly pale as he tried to scream.

"Cease...." was all he could get out before the vibrations from the bows drawned out his voice as the arrows filled the sky.

Li Yan Bei widened his stance and, with a simple flick of his arm, spun Sun Chong up in the air and right into the oncoming arrows. In an instant

Sun Chong's body was covered with arrows like a hedgehog. Li Yan Bei let out a yell and was prepared to charge onto the carts. But unexpectedly, as soon as this group of shooters let loose their arrows, they immediately fell down onto the floor of the car only to be replaced with another shift of archers behind them.

Twenty eight bows were fully drawn, arrows awaiting release. Li Yan Bei froze.

That crowd of people following him was already cut off by a third cart. Even if his body was fashioned out of iron, there was no way he could survive rounds after rounds of this kind of assault!

After 20 years of struggles, several hundreds of battles and fights, he still could not avoid falling into his enemies' traps.

Li Yan Bei's eyes were blood filled as he looked like a wolf that had fallen into the hunter's trap. Just one twang of the bow and even this proud and mighty leader of the capital city would be hard pressed to avoid having his heart pierced by an arrow.

But it was precisely at that instant, a sudden and sharp sound of something flying through the air could be heard coming from the roof on the left.

Flash! Two streaks of green flew across the bows.

"Zeng!" "Zeng!" "Zeng!"

With a string of sounds like marbles dropped on the floor, the strings of all 28 bows were instantly cut in half by the two streaks of light! Then came a loud but flat thud as those two streaks smashed against the door on the right. They turned out to be nothing more than two bronze coins.

Who could be so strong as to be able to cut 28 bows in half with just two coins? The faces of the archers were deathly pale as they all began to tumble off of the cart and running towards the narrow alleys. But Li Yan Bei did not chase after them.

These men were not his opponents, they were not worthy to be his foe. Besides, he had learned quite a long time ago that killing could not make people truly respect you.

Instead, he just took a deep breath and announced in a grave voice: "Slow down, no need to rush everyone. Go back and tell your master that since Li Yan Bei did not die today, he will surely find him one of these days!"

Someone began clapping on top of the roof on the left.

"Great stuff! Such composure! Such dignity! Truly fitting of the famed Li Yan Bei!" That person shouted with a hint of laughter.

Li Yan Bei began to laugh as well.

"Pity even if the famed Li Yan Bei had three heads and six arms, he would still not be a match for Lu Xiao Feng's two fingers!"

With a hearty laugh, that person jumped down from the roof. His round and chiselled face was covered with dust and wear from travel, but his eyes were still bright, and his eye brows were still shiny black.

Four eyebrows. Other than him, who else in this world could grow a mustache as pretty as his eyebrows?

"You figured out who I am?"

"Golden Coin Flick takes strength in one's fingers," Li Yan Bei observed. "Other than Lu Xiao Feng, who else could slice the strings of 28 bows in half?"

The sun had already risen. Under the sunlight, the steam that poured out from the frying pan looked like a morning fog.

Lu Xiao Feng had a fuming piece of pork in one hand and a bowl of fermented bean soup in the other, his third bowl. Only after draining this third bowl did he finally let out a drawn out sigh and wipe the sweat off of his forehead.

"In the three years since I've been back at the capital, you know what I've missed the most?" He asked with a smile.

"Bean soup?" Li Yan Bei answered with a smile.

Lu Xiao Feng threw his head back and laughed.

"The thing I missed the most is indeed bean soup, and the second most is fried liver, especially the fire fried liver of Gathering Gods Inn, not to mention Shiny Glow Pavilion northern roast and Meat Pie Street's meat pie."

"What about me?" asked an amused Li Yan Bei.

"Well, when I'm not hungry, only then would I think of you," replied a smiling Lu Xiao Feng.

"But you probably didn't think that there would come a day when I would almost perish in the hands of another."

Lu Xiao Feng had to admit that was true.

"I didn't think you were going to let them go either!"

"You think I like killing?"

A smile appeared on Lu Xiao Feng's face again.

"If you did like killing, then I'm afraid you wouldn't have lived until today."

"Yet you...."

"Yet you still should have at least asked who sent them!" Lu Xiao Feng cut him off.

A smile appeared on Li Yan Bei's face as well.

"I didn't need to ask.

"You already figured it out?"

The smile on Li Yan Bei's face did not exactly look happy.

"Other than Old Du from the southern half of the city, who else would have enough guts to try to pull a move like that?" He casually stated.

"Du Tong Xuan?"

Li Yan Bei nodded, but the small boiled clam shell that he had just picked up was already squeezed to dust.

"The two of you have not meddled with each other for the last ten years, and he should have known a long time ago that you are not an easily dealt with person. Why would he take a risk like this?"

"For six hundred thousand taels of silver and his territories in the south of the city."

Lu Xiao Feng did not understand.

"I've a bet with him, and the wager is six hundred thousand taels of silver and all of his territory."

That was truly quite a wager. Even Lu Xiao Feng could not help but take a deep breath.

"So what are you two betting on?"

"The duel on September 15th!"

-Night of full moon, peak of Zi Jin, a sword from the west, an angel from the outter heavens!

"The duel was originally scheduled for August 15th on top of Mount Zi Jin. But Xi Men Chui Xue insisted on delaying the date for a month and changing its location to here."

"I know."

"Ever since that day of August 15th, nobody in the world has seen or heard of Xi Men Chui Xue!"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed again. Of course, he knew about that as well. He was also trying to find Xi Men Chui Xue, trying very hard.

"That's the reason why everyone thinks that Xi Men Chui Xue is afraid of Ye Gu Cheng," Li Yan Bei continued, "that he must have already gone into hiding."

"But you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he's not that kind of a man!"

Li Yan Bei nodded.

"That's why even though others think he'd surely lose, I'm still betting on him to win! No matter how much the wager."

"Of course, Du Tong Xuan can't let an opportunity like this slip away."

"So he made a bet with me."

"Using his territory as a wager against your territory?"

"And if he loses, he has to pay an extra six hundred thousand taels of silver on top."

"I know, even a month ago, people were willing to take two to three odds that Ye Gu Cheng would win!"

"The bookies' odds reached two to one a couple of days ago. Everyone still thinks that Ye Gu Cheng would win. Up until yesterday morning, Du Tong Xuan still believed that he had a nine in ten chance of winning."

"Up until yesterday morning?"

"Because the situation had completely changed yesterday afternoon!"

"Oh?"

Li Yan Bei stared at Lu Xiao Feng in almost disbelief.

"Have you really not heard of the news that Ye Gu Cheng has been injured?"

Lu Xiao Feng shook his head, obviously shocked by the news.

"How could he be injured? Who could injure him?"

"Tang Tian Yi."

"The Tang Family's eldest son?" Lu Xiao Feng frowned.

"Correct."

"Rumour has it that for some unknown reason or another, the two of them got into a confrontation near Zhang Jia Kou. Even though Ye Gu Cheng's move, Outer Heaven Angel, badly injured Tang Tian Yi, he was also hit by a handful of Tang Tian Yi's Poison Sand."

The Tang Family poisons could only be cured by the descendants of the

Tang Family. When someone is hit by their poison, no matter who it is, even if he did not die right away, he still does not have much longer to live.

"Once this news reached here, those men who placed their bets on Ye Gu Cheng have been like ants on a frying pan, some have considered suicide, other have tried to figure out a way to have the bet called off."

"And of course, if the other bettor is dead, then the bet is off!" Lu Xiao Feng concluded.

Li Yan Bei let out a colder snicker.

"That's why Du Tong Xuan would take such a risk to try and kill me!" Li Yan Bei finished the thought for him.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed. He finally understood the wherefor and why of this event.

"Rumour has it that just last night alone, there has been at least 30 deaths in the city because of this. Even the WestImperialPalace's warden, "Iron Palm Turns the Sky", was ambushed by someone in the alley behind Iron Lion Lane because he placed an eight thousand tael bet on Xi Men Chui Xue."

"Didn't think eight thousand taels of silver was enough to buy Iron Palm Zhao's life!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Sometimes, even eighty taels of silver is more than enough to buy a

life!"

Lu Xiao Feng looked down at the food in front of him and discovered that, suddenly, he was not that hungry anymore.

"Did anybody actually see the duel between Ye Gu Cheng and Tang Tian Yi with his own eyes?" He suddenly asked.

"No."

"Well if nobody saw it, then how are we so sure that this news is reliable?" Lu Xiao Feng asked.

"Because everyone believes that the source of this news would never lie!"

"Who's the source?"

"Honest Monk!"

Lu Xiao Feng could not say anything more. Not for the first time, nobody could find anything to say with regards to Honest Monk's credibility.

"Honest Monk arrived in the city around noon yesterday," Li Yan Bei explained, "the first thing he did was go over to 'Ear Eyes' and ordered stewed dumplings. He ate one dumpling, and let out a sigh!"

By this time, the oil on the pork had already froze in the September winds of the North. At a glance, it looked like a layer of frost.

"The Four Swords of Heaven just happened to be eating there at the time, so they asked him why did he sigh," Li Yan Bei continued. "That's when Honest Monk broke the news."

Of course, the Four Swords of Heaven were not the only ones who heard the news.

"Other than Honest Monk and the Four Swords of Heaven, at least four or five hundred men of honour have made their way to the city in the last half a month."

Lu Xiao Feng looked down at the oil on the meat, he suddenly felt the urge to puke.

"From what I heard, there should be at least three to four hundred more famous men from the martial world who will arrive before the 15th, among them are at least five heads of sects, ten clan leaders, and twenty three escort masters. Even Wu Dang's Wooden Taoist and Shao Lin's Master Abbot will travel here. Nobody wants to miss this duel."

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly slammed his palm down onto the table.

"What do they think Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng are? Two circus monkeys doing tricks? Two dogs fighting over a discarded bone in the street?" He sneered.

The meat and the fire pan jumped up from the table when he slammed his palm down and eventually rolled to a stop on the ground.

Li Yan Bei looked at Lu Xiao Feng in shock. He had never seen Lu Xiao Feng so emotional, nor could he figure out what made Lu Xiao Feng so angry.

"Aren't you here to watch the duel too?" He had to ask.

Lu Xiao Feng's fists were clenched tight.

"I only hope to never see this duel!"

"But now that Ye Gu Cheng has been injured, there's no way that Xi Men Chui Xue would lose!"

"It doesn't matter who wins or loses, it's all the same!"

"Isn't Xi Men Chui Xue your friend?"

"Precisely because he is my friend, that's why I don't want to see him like a dog chasing after an unseen bone!"

"What unseen bone?" Li Yan Bei still did not understand.

"Reputation." - What other people think of you is precisely that piece of unseen bone.

"If he does win this duel, it'll let you win Du Tong Xuan's territory, and those self-aggrandizing self-righteous swordsmen would all get to see a good show, not to mention they get to see their moves as well as the flaws and weaknesses of their techniques. But what about himself?" Lu Xiao Feng coldly continued.

Would he not have won? But even if he did win, what good would it do him? Could anyone really understand the loneliness of the victor? Li Yan Bei had finally understood Lu Xiao Feng.

He quietly stared at Lu Xiao Feng, stared at him for a long time.

"This duel of theirs, they wanted to fight themselves," he finally said, slowly. "Nobody forced them to do this!"

Of course not. There was absolutely nobody in this world that could force those two men to do anything.

"I am also Xi Men Chui Xue's friend," Li Yan Bei continued. "I don't want to see him take this risk either, nor do I ever intended to use him to get Du Tong Xuan's territory. But if he wanted this fight himself, then I can't do anything to stop him!"

He looked Lu Xiao Feng in the eye and continued, emphasizing every word.

"Even you can't do anything to stop him!"

Lu Xiao Feng did not want to admit it, but he could not deny it either.

“Even more importantly, even the two of them themselves can’t do anything to stop it either!” Li Yan Bei concluded.

Many things in this world are like that. There are just some things that a man has to do in this world, and it does not really matter if he wants to or not.

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly let out a gentle sigh.

“I’m tired, I want to go take a warm bath!”

The bath was carved out of limestone and the water was very hot. Lu Xiao Feng submerged himself entirely under the hot water and tried his best to relax his arms and legs. He was truly exhausted, the kind of mental and physical exhaustion that originates from deep within one’s heart.

Anytime he finish something big, or solve a huge case, he would always feel like this. But never as deep as this.

The Embroidery Bandit, Jin Jiu Ling, Lu Shao Hua, First Madame Gong Sun, Jiang Chong Wei, Ou Yang Qing, Xue Bing... he never wanted to think of these people again, especially Xue Bing.

Everytime he thinks of Xue Bing, his heart would feel like it was being stabbed - stabbed by a sewing needle, a long, sharp, burning, and poisonous needle. In order to escape the pain, he went so far as to try and avoid First Madame Gong Sun. That's why as soon as he reached Jin Ling, he found a way and quietly left her.

Pity that some things in this world he could not escape from, nor could they be avoided. Xi Men Chui Xue, Ye Gu Cheng, Du Tong Xuan, Honest Monk....

He did not want to think anymore.

"Xi Men Chui Xue must have already arrived here!" He suddenly declared.

"How can you be so sure?" Li Yan Bei was lying on the side of the bath. A burly looking topless man was busy washing his back for him. This place was inside of his territory. He was as safe here as royalties in their own castles.

"Xi Men Chui Xue always had this quirky concept."

"What concept is that?"

"He had always felt that killing or being killed is a very holy event!"

Oh?"

"So matter who he is dueling, he would always arrive a couple of days early, fast for three days, and then take a ceremonial bath to clense himself."

Li Yan Bei suddenly let out a little laugh.

"And you think that he's weird for doing that?"

"You don't think he's weird for doing that?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because if I was him, I would do the same thing!"

He raised his hand to signal to the burly fellow to put scrub harder. More than ten years worth of enjoying the finest wine and women have not yet left its mark on his body. His stomach was still washboard flat and the muscles on his body were still as prominent as they were in the old days. These daily baths and power massages really have helped him immensely.

"Fasting and clensing can clear a man's mind and help him concentrate. Arriving several days ahead of time at the location of the duel would help acclimate one to the place, making it possible to gain a positional advantage during the duel. That's why I have always believed that Xi Men Chui Xue is not a man who's easily defeated. Because if he wasn't 70% sure of winning, he would never fight to begin with."

"So you think he has already arrived as well?"

"Mmhmm."

"But even until today, you still have not found a trace of him."

"No."

Lu Xiao Feng frowned.

"Two people who attracts attention as much as them arrived here and you didn't hear a thing? That's truly amazing."

Li Yan Bei frowned as well.

"Two? Who's the other person?"

"Sun Xiu Qing."

{Note: Lu Xiao Feng actually replied Sun Xiu Zhen, I changed it to keep it consistent with the rest of the book.}

"A woman?"

"A very beautiful woman!"

"He's keeping a woman at his side this close to the duel?"

"He would never let other women be at his side, but she's different."

Li Yan Bei frowned even deeper and thought for a long time before letting out a loud sigh.

"Fortunately, Ye Gu Cheng's already injured, else...."

He turned over and suddenly stopped talking. Outside of the steam fogged room, a ghostly shape of a man suddenly appeared.

"Who is it?" Li Yan Bei demanded in a fierce voice.

That man did not answer, instead there came a sinister laugh.

"You shouldn't have come here for a bath today!"

"Why not?" Li Yan Bei demanded again.

"Because if Du Tong Xuan could buy Sun Chong, he could definitely buy the man who washes your back for you!"

The man's expression changed dramatically as he suddenly made a break for the door. But Li Yan Bei had already grabbed a hold of his arm. He was normally strong man, but under Li Yan Bei's grasp, he suddenly

did not even have the strength to fight back. He tried to struggle, but only heard the sound of his own wrist snapping.

"The poison is on the towel, if you want the anecdote, go wait in the Oriental Spring Pavilion outside."

The ghostly man moved like a ghost as well, with a mere flick of his sleeve, he was gone. But his voice could still be heard from far away.

"Once you get to Oriental Spring Pavilion, you'd find out who I am, you can still come after me then!"

By the time he finished, he sounded at least 200 meters away.

Li Yan Bei tore the towel away from the man's hand. That man was still screaming from the pain as Li Yan Bei stuffed the towel into his open mouth. His scream suddenly stopped as his body twitched violently. His entire body literally shriveled up as he curled up and fell onto the floor, not moving anymore. There really was poison on this towel!

When that man was scrubbing his back, the poison on the towel soaked through his skin. Suddenly, every muscle on Li Yan Bei's body began to twitch and jump uncontrollably.

Even Lu Xiao Feng was taken aback by the sight before him.

"Du Tong Xuan! What a sinister move!"

"And who was that man just then?" Li Yan Bei asked, fist clenched tightly as he tried to control himself. "How did he know about Du Tong Xuan's plan? And why would he save me?"

To find the answers, there was only one thing to do.

"To the Oriental Spring Pavilion!"

Oriental Spring Pavilion was also in Li Yan Bei's territory. They rode there on a carriage even though Li Yan Bei liked to walk. However, because he was afraid that the poison would break out, he did not want to exert any more strength than necessary.

Those who seen him were as polite and courteous as they normally were towards him, bowing deeply as a sign of respect as soon as they saw him approach. Nobody could tell that this tiger of a man's life was in danger. Of course, Li Yan Bei was not as polite and courteous as he normally would be towards these people -- nobody with a sack of explosive that could go off at any moment inside of them would be in that good of a mood.

The Oriental Spring Pavilion was huge and had a thriving business. At the time that they arrived, there was no table open, but everywhere Li Yan Bei goes there would inevitably be someone getting up and yielding the table to him. They picked a table in the center of the room, facing the stairs so they could immediately see everyone came up the stairs. There was nobody coming upstairs, only people going down.

Seeing the vicious look on Li Yan Bei's face, those who knew better were already getting ready to leave, some were quietly making payment and

some others were secretly discussing the situation.

Suddenly, all the noise and sound in the building stopped. Every eye were glued on one single person, a person who had just walked the stairs.

This man was very tall, and very thin. His clothing were obviously very meticulously picked out and his mannerisms were exceedingly refined. Even though he was not that old, his sideburns were already turning white. His skinny and green face always seemed to be carrying not only at least some signs of illness but also a definite feeling of power and authority, making it impossible for people to take him lightly.

He was wearing a jade blue outfit made of the highest quality of cloth and color, on his effeminate and well preserved pair of hands was a priceless white jade ring. Even on his silk belt was a huge piece of flawless jade. From his appearance, he looked just like an official from the Imperial Court or a scholar from the Imperial Academy.

In truth, quite a number of people do call him Scholar, and he really enjoyed being called that. But he was not a real scholar.

He was smiling when he walked up the stairs, but everybody who saw him walking up was finding it difficult to smile, especially Li Yan Bei, his expression turned even sicker.

Nobody could have imagined that Du Tong Xuan would suddenly appear inside of Li Yan Bei's territory the same way that nobody could imagine that a wolf would walk into a tiger's cave. In the last ten years, Du Tong Xuan did not set foot outside of the south of the city even once.

Scholar Du was always a very careful and cautious person, what made him change today?

Even more unimaginable for everyone present, he walked straight up to Li Yan Bei.

"I hope General Li is doing well today?" He asked with a smile as he cupped his fist.

He liked it when other people call him Scholar Du, but Li Yan Bei hated it when being referred to as General Li. Lu Xiao Feng laughed. To him, be it Scholar or General, the two names were both quite humorous.

"And might you be the Quick Heart Quick Mind Hero Lu Xiao Feng?" Du Tong Xuan looked over at him and smiled back.

"You are no scholar, he's no general, and I'm no hero, I say let's we should just forego all these polite pleasantries." Lu Xiao Feng replied with a laugh.

Du Tong Xuan's expression did not even change as his mannerisms still remained as refined and dignified as ever. Lu Xiao Feng was finding it hard to see that this was the same unblinking killer that was Old Man Du of the city south.

Li Yan Bei's stares were like knives, staring at him.

"If I were you, I would never have come here!" He suddenly declared.

"I'm not you, so I did!"

"You shouldn't have!"

"I already have!"

"If you want to come here, you can." Li Yan Bei snickered. "But I'm afraid leaving might not be as easy!"

Du Tong Xuan actually smiled.

"Is this the way that General Li repays someone for saving his life?"

The reply shocked Li Yan Bei.

Du Tong Xuan, using that pair of jade ring wearing hand of his, pulled out a chair and sat down at the table.

"I had thought that you would at least invite me to a drink." He continued with a smile.

"Was that person who just saved me really you?" Li Yan Bei finally asked despite of himself.

Du Tong Xuan nodded.

Li Yan Bei stared back.

"Just today, there have been two attempts on my life, that's also you?"

"Sometimes I find it very easy to change my mind!" Du Tong Xuan noted matter of factly.

"What made you change your mind?"

Du Tong Xuan did not answer that question; instead, he suddenly shouted: "The anecdote!"

Almost before he finished shouting, a man was there behind him. A short and skinny man wearing all black. His deathly pale complexion was completely devoid of all emotion and expression, but his eyes were deeply sunken and dark as abyss. If not for his eyes, he could have easily been mistaken for a corpse.

All these people here in the room, yet amazingly nobody saw how he had gotten there. A corpse-like face, a ghost-like quickness -- Li Yan Bei quickly discerned that he was none other than the man who mysteriously appeared and disappeared outside of the bath earlier. With a demon claw like hand, he had already placed a deathly green colored wooden flask on the table.

"This is the anecdote, I suggest it would be best if you take it as soon as possible, before the effects of the poison breaks out!"

Li Yan Bei's fist remained clenched. For him to take this anecdote in front of all these people would truly be an enormous embarrassment.

But he just could not refuse either.

And Du Tong Xuan knew he could not refuse.

"I was just going to come here to deliver the anecdote, but now...." He casually declared.

"You changed your mind again?"

Du Tong Xuan smiled.

"I only just thought something else to ask of you!"

"What?"

"Don't know if you are interested in adding a little bit more to our wager!"

Li Yan Bei was taken aback once again.

"You want to raise the wager?"

"You are scared?"

"How much more do you want to raise?"

"How much more can you wager?"

Li Yan Bei's fists underneath the table were clenched again.

"In my four bookies, there are still stored more than eight hundred thousand more taels of silver!"

"Then I'll place another one million two hundred thousand taels of silver in them first thing tomorrow!" His eyes were glowing. "I don't want to take advantage of you, so we are still wagering on two to three odds!"

Li Yan Bei's eyes were glowing as well, he stared Du Tong Xuan in the face and declared, word for word: "If I lose, I would immediately leave the capital. As long as you live, I would never set foot inside the capital again!"

"If I lose, I would immediately leave the country, as long as you live, I would never set foot inside the Great Wall again!"

"That settles it then?"

"Hit palms to cement the deal!"

The two men slowly raised their hands, eyes never leaving the other's eyes. Suddenly, not a sound could be heard anywhere in the building. The

wagers in this bet was beyond anyone's imagination, they had literally wagered the lives of their entire families on the line.

Everyone was staring at the two palms, their own palms covered in a layer of cold sweat.

"Pa!" The sound of the two palms meeting ringed out, but for whom does the bell toll?

Li Yan Bei's expression was very grave, only after a long while did he finally put his hand down.

But Du Tong Xuan was smiling rather proudly.

"You must find this strange, why would I raise the bet when I know that Ye Gu Cheng is injured?"

Li Yan Bei did not refute the statement, for he really was finding all this very strange. Everybody was. Du Tong Xuan had always been a cautious man and would never do anything he was not sure of. Why would he be so sure about this? The answer to this question would come very quickly!

The wind breezed by outside the window. Suddenly, everyone became aware of a strange flowery fragrance. Six young maidens with ebony black hair down to their shoulders and clad in white came walking up the stairs all the while tossing flowers from the baskets on their hands onto the floor, creating a literal floral carpet of chrysanthemums up the stairs.

A man, stepping on the flower petals, slowly walked up the stairs. His face was white, not a colorless white or a pale white but a kind of vibrant and glowing kind of white, like a white piece of jade.

His eyes were not completely black, but were frighteningly bright, like two cold stars. A top of his pitch black hair sat a pearl crown made of white sandwood. The clothes he was wearing were also as white as the driven snow. He took his time when he walked up like how a king would walk into his own court, or like an angel, coming to visit this world.

Li Yan Bei did not recognize this man, he had never seen this man before in his life. But he knew who this man was!

"A sword from the west, an angel from the outter heavens!" Master of White Cloud Castle Ye Gu Cheng had actually showed up! He was still alive!

There was a glow that almost made one squint emanating from his body. Nobody in his right mind would say that he looked like a man carrying an injury.

When Li Yan Bei saw him, even his breathing almost stopped, but his heart did sink. Ye Gu Cheng did not see him, instead, those cold, starry eyes of his were staring at Lu Xiao Feng. Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"You came as well!" Ye Gu Cheng said.

"I came as well!" Lu Xiao Feng replied.

"Excellent, I knew you would come!"

Lu Xiao Feng did not responde, for Ye Gu Cheng's eyes suddenly looked away.

"Who among you is Tang Tian Rong?" He suddenly asked.

By the time he asked this questions, his eyes had already settled upon a man in the left corner.

This man's face was originally very handsome, but by now it suddenly seemed frozen in a twist. He had been sitting quietly in the corner all this time, even Lu Xiao Feng had not noticed him when he arrived. He was still very young but his outfit was very ornate and elegant, but there was vulture like glint of cruelty in his eyes.

Those eyes were staring straight back at Ye Gu Cheng as well.

"I am Tang Tian Rong!" He answered, emphasizing each word.

The people sitting at seven or eight tables between him and Ye Gu Cheng suddenly scattered into the other two corners of the room.

"Do you know who I am?" Ye Gu Cheng asked.

Tang Tian Rong nodded.

"Are you wondering right now exactly how I'm still alive?"

The corner of Tang Tian Rong's mouth seemed to be flinching involuntarily.

"Who gave you the antidote?"

Only now did everybody know that, this time, Honest Monk had still not lied. Ye Gu Cheng really was injured, injured by the Poison Sand of the Tang Family. But yet how could this poison that had long frightened anybody and everybody in all of the martial world until this day not have had any ill effects on Ye Gu Cheng? Who indeed gave him the antidote?

Everybody wanted to hear Ye Gu Cheng's answer, but yet he just would not answer this question.

Instead, he casually replied: "There was no poison to begin with, why bother with an antidote?"

"No poison to begin with?"

"Where's the poison in a bit of dust?"

Tang Tian Rong's face dropped.

"My family's Flying Sand is nothing but a bit of dust in your eyes?"

Ye Gu Cheng nodded. Tang Tian Rong did not talk anymore, instead, he slowly stood up and loosened his robe to reveal the shirt he wore inside.

His shirt was not strange, nor scary. What was frightening was two leopard skin pouches that were held tightly around his hips along with a pair of fish-skin gloves on his belt!

The entire pavilion suddenly became deathly quiet again. Everybody wanted leave, but nobody was willing to leave. For everybody knew that right here, right now, an incredible battle was about to ensue.

Tang Tian Rong took off his robe and put on his gloves. Those fish skin gloves had an eerie green glow, his face seemed to be a sickly green as well.

Ye Gu Cheng quietly stood there, watching. A boy in white walked up from behind him and offered an ancient and elegant sword in black sheath. Sword was now in hand!

Tang Tian Rong's eyes did not leave the sword in his hand.

"Anybody else here thinks that my family's Flying Sand is nothing more than a bit of dust?" He suddenly shouted.

Of course nobody answered!

"If nobody else thinks so, then it would be best if everybody could

please go down stairs so as to avoid accidents!"

Those who were unwilling to leave had to leave now. The Tang Family's Poison Sands, in the eyes of those in the martial world, was even more frightening than the Black Plague. Nobody wanted to risk touching even one.

"No need to leave!" Ye Gu Cheng suddenly declared.

"No need?"

"I guarantee that you could not even release the Flying Sand out of your hand!" He matter of factly answered.

Tang Tian Rong's expression changed again.

The Tang Family Poison Sand was not just frightening because of the poison it contained, but also because that the Tang Family disciples were extremely fast!

Even those who had witnessed their attack first hand could not describe just how they attacked. But this time Tang Tian Rong really was not even able to release the poisonous sands. As soon as his hands moved, the glow of a sword took flight!

Nobody can describe how spectacular and mesmerizing this strike was, and even less can describe its speed! This was not just a sword, but an angry rumble from the god of thunder. Like a bolt of lightning, it flashed, and disappeared.

Ye Gu Cheng had already returned onto the floral carpet. But Tang Tian Rong was still standing there, not moving one bit, his arms had fallen to his side, and his face frozen stiff.

It was only then that everyone saw the blood suddenly spewing out from underneath his collarbone on both shoulders. Tears flooded out with the blood. He knew, at this moment, that in his life he would never be able to use the poison again. To a member of the Tang family, it was a fate more frightening and cruel than death itself!

But now Ye Gu Cheng's attention had returned to Lu Xiao Feng.

"What an extraordinary strike of Outer Heaven Angel!" Even Lu Xiao Feng had to praise the strike.

"It is indeed a strike peerless in all of the world!" Ye Gu Cheng declared.

"I won't deny that!" Lu Xiao Feng agreed.

A strange emotion suddenly surfaced in Ye Gu Cheng's eyes and he asked a very strange question.

"What about Xi Men Chui Xue?"

"I'm not Xi Men Chui Xue?" Lu Xiao Feng answered. A strange question could only be answered with a strange reply.

Ye Gu Cheng smiled and stared back at Lu Xiao Feng.

"Good thing you are not." He slowly replied. Still smiling, he turned around and walked down the stairs.

As soon as he left, the entire pavilion suddenly exploded. Some people were loudly debating, while others were scrambling out to be the first to spread the news. Not only was Ye Gu Cheng not dead, he was not even injured. Everybody had seen his strike! His peerless, matchless strike! Li Yan Bei saw it too, saw it very clearly. That was why he looked like he was staring into space.

Du Tong Xuan looked over at him and suddenly smiled.

"I'm sure you realize now why I changed my mind!"

Li Yan Bei did not answer, and he did not need to answer.

"Usually, I only kill people, I don't save them, but this time I'll make an exception." Du Tong Xuan continued. "Because I don't want you to die!"

Still smiling, he stood up.

"Because a corpse can't pay up a debt, a gambling debt!"

Gambling debt. Only a corpse can renege on such a debt. As long as Li Yan Bei was alive, then he would have to pay up. A man who goes back on his words would never be able to live in a place like this!

Now, even though that battle still had not began, everyone was sure that Li Yan Bei would lose. But if he really lost this bet, being alive was not much better than being dead.

Slowly, hesitantly, Li Yan Bei picked up the antidote that Du Tong Xuan left on the table. He suddenly laughed.

"No matter what, at least Du Tong Xuan saved my life this once!"

His laugh looked very forced. The hand he picked up the antidote from seemed to be slightly shaking.

"No matter what, at least you are still alive right now, and haven't lost!" Lu Xiao Feng tried to comfort him.

"At least not yet," Li Yan Bei nodded.

Lu Xiao Feng stared Li Yan Bei in the face.

"But you don't seem to be nearly as confident as before."

Li Yan Bei did not refute this notion, nor could he. Only after a long silence did he finally let out a long, drawn out, exhausted sigh.

"That truly was a strike peerless in this world!"

"A peerless strike doesn't necessarily mean a must-win strike!" Lu Xiao Feng declared.

"Oh?"

"There is no must-win strike in this world!"

"I know that Xi Men Chui Xue has never lost before, he should have at least a half a chance to win, but now...."

"Now what?"

Li Yan Bei smiled again, once again, an even more forced smile.

"If he had arrived in the city, at least I would have known it by now!"

"So if you don't know about it, then that means he hasn't arrived?"

"You could say that!"

"And if he hadn't arrived here yet, does that convey that he doesn't have confidence in himself?"

"What do you think?" Li Yan Bei threw the question back at him.

"I don't know, I don't like to speculate too much on things that have yet to happen!"

Upon hearing that comment, Li Yan Bei became silent again.

"Did you recognize that guy who came with Du Tong Xuan?" He suddenly asked.

Lu Xiao Feng shook his head.

"But you probably noticed that his lightness kungfu wasn't shabby at all!"

"Far from shabby. Right now, the people who are better than him probably number less than 10!"

"You have traveled far and wide and seen many things, don't you at least have an idea on who he is?"

"If not for his small and skinny stature, I would have probably mistook him for Si Kong Zhai Xing!" Lu Xiao Feng said, in deep thought.

"He isn't?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Is that why you can't figure out who he is?"

"But I can't shake the feeling that something's not right!"

"What's bothering you?"

"No matter who he is, based on his skills, there's no way he should be a servant of a man like that!"

Li Yan Bei did not say anything more for a long time.

"You just arrived here at the capital, I know you must really want to tour the city a bit. I'm sure you'll meet up with a lot of friends."

Lu Xiao Feng did not refute this claim.

He really did want to see what kind of people had showed up here, and he also wanted to go find Honest Monk.

"Tonight, I'll go to Lasting Happiness Hall in Gold Fish Alley and order us a couple of dishes and have them delivered to my house. We'll celebrate at my house tonight!"

"Great!" Lu Xiao Feng replied before suddenly bursting out laughing. "Which one of your houses is that?"

Li Yan Bei laughed too.

"Today is the 13th? I'm supposed to dine at 13th Mistress' place tonight. Besides, she's wanted to see you for a while now and find out why you have 4 eye brows."

"I have wanted to meet her too, heard she's a very famous beauty!" Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"Great!" Li Yan Bei laughed. "When dinner time rolls around, I'll order a couple of guys to wait here for you to take you to my place!"

"If I happen to run into Hua Man Lou, I might have to drag him along as well!"

"No problem!"

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly sighed.

"The strange thing is that, he seemed to have disappeared along with Xi Men Chui Xue. If I could find him, I might be able to find Xi Men Chui Xue too!"

"Why?"

"He has this weird ability to find people, even I can't begin to explain how exactly he does it!"

"If you go take a walk outside, he might find you instead!"

"Very possible."

"Then what are you waiting here for?"

Lu Xiao Feng looked Li Yan Bei in the face and slowly replied: "Waiting for you to drink the antidote!"

"You want to watch me take the antidote before you leave?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

Li Yan Bei suddenly threw his head back and laughed.

"Don't worry, I don't want to die just yet. I can't bear to make 30 women turn into widows all at once!"

Chapter 2 - Dead Man Tell No Tales

September 13th, just past noon. After Lu Xiao Feng walked down Oriental Spring Pavilion, he began to make his way briskly down the street. The sun had already risen.

He decided that this was truly a beautiful city, its streets were wide and flat, its buildings were neatly kept and clean, every single store front was more refined and delicate than those found in other cities.

But he also knew that the most beautiful thing about this city was not its bustling streets or its beautiful architecture, nor was it those world famous scenery and landmarks, but its people. No matter where you came from, no matter where you go, once you have visited this city, you will never forget it.

Once past midday, the wind would start to blow. As soon as the wind would blow, the air would be filled with dust. But no dust storm in this world, no matter how large, could cover up the beauty of this city. Even though Lu Xiao Feng was walking at a brisk pace, he had no destination in mind what so ever.

Of the people he wanted to see, he saw none, but of the people he did not want to see, he saw quite a few. The first one he saw was Ou Yang Qing.

Ou Yang Qing was roaming through the jewelery shops outside, standing next to a seemingly elegantly dressed madame with a headful

of pearls.

The lady was probably very beautiful, but Lu Xiao Feng dared not to take a second glance. As soon as he saw Ou Yang Qing, he turned his head in the other direction. -- He thought of Xue Bing again. Ou Yang Qing obviously saw him as well, but also pretended not to notice. Suddenly, she grabbed the madame's hand and boarded an ebony black carriage.

Only after the carriage rumbled out of sight did Lu Xiao Feng turn his head around as he stared numbly at the dust the carriage stirred up as it rumbled away, not sure how he was feeling inside himself.

On the other side of the street, several people were waving at him, but a couple steps away from him was a young man staring at him, hand on sword.

He recognized those men, among them were two master escorts from the Sichuan and Hunan areas, a disciple of Wudang, and a helmsman of a bandit group from around Sichuan. But he did not recognize that young man who was staring at him.

The stare was quite a vicious one as well, and it was coupled with an expression that was just looking for trouble. But Lu Xiao Feng did not want any trouble, so he only lightly nodded towards those men before quickly turning around and walking eastward.

Suddenly, a hand reached out from an antique art store on the side of the street and patted him on the shoulder.

"You are here! I knew you would come!"

A old taoist with a headful of a silvery white hair and a barely patched together robe walked out from the store, laughing; behind him was a thin but healthy looking old man with clean and neat clothes. They were none other than the Wooden Taoist and Ancient Pine Hermit.

All Lu Xiao Feng could do was return the smile.

"I knew you would come too!"

The Wooden Taoist threw his head back in laughter. Despite his advancing age, his face was still bursting red with energy and still had a glint of mischief. Very few people could tell that he was none other than one of the three most celebrated swordsmen in the world.

"I can't miss this duel!" He patted Lu Xiao Feng on the shoulder again and smiled. "Even if I'm too old to walk here, I would crawl!"

"Is it because you want to see where the weaknesses are in their techniques so you can challenge them later?" Lu Xiao Feng matter of factly countered.

The Wooden Taoist was not offended, instead he sighed.

"I'm old, getting into sword duels or drinking contests no longer interests me. But I'm still always up for a game of chess with anybody who wants to challenge me!"

"Actually, we were just looking for you!" Ancient Pine Hermit suddenly declared.

"Me? What for?"

"We have arranged a meeting with someone this afternoon and wanted to invite you along!" Ancient Pine Hermit answered.

"What do I have to do with the meeting?"

"Because you would certainly want to meet this person as well!" The Wooden Taoist answered before Ancient Pine Hermit was able to. The smile on his face seemingly very mysterious.

"Who is this person?" Lu Xiao Feng had to ask.

The smile on the Wooden Taoist's face became even more mysterious.

"If you really want to know who this person is, why don't you come to the meeting?"

Of course Lu Xiao Feng went. He had always been susceptible to temptation, not to mention his unmatched curiosity.

The location of the meeting was a strange one. It was actually in a long been abandoned kiln yard outside of the city. All the dust covered kilns looked just like mound after mound of graves.

"So many great places inside the city, why did you guys pick here for the meeting?" Lu Xiao Feng frowned.

"Because we are meeting a weirdo!" Ancient Pine Hermit replied.

"Strictly speaking, we are meeting three weirdos. One slacker who has never done a day of honest work in his life, and two old men even weirder than I am!" The Wooden Taoist clarified.

"But these two old men aren't just your average old men, it's been rumoured that there is nothing that they don't know and no problems they can't solve." Ancient Pine Hermit added.

The Wooden Taoist shot a look at Lu Xiao Feng.

"I'm sure by now you have figured out who we have arranged to meet here!" He smiled.

Of course Lu Xiao Feng knew. At this precise moment, a short and skinny man with a huge head slowly approached on a mule. He was not yet close, but the stench of alcohol was already noticeable. This person seemed to have never had a sober moment in all of his life. Lu Xiao Feng laughed. Everytime he meet Mister Big Shot Son of a Turtle, he could not help but laugh a little.

"Seems like your great self didn't have to be bailed out of debt by somebody else this time! Truly a rare event!"

Big Shot Sun shot a look at him and exasperatingly rolled his eyes in disgust.

"You are here too, huh? I...."

"You knew I was going to come long ago, right?" Lu Xiao Feng cut him off with a laugh.

Big Shot Sun sighed and mumbled under his breath: "Those who shouldn't be here are all here, yet those who should be here are not...."

He threw his leg over the mule's back and jumped down. But his legs were weak and he wobbled, almost making him fall flat onto the ground.

Even the Wooden Taoist could not resist laughing.

"Honestly now, have you ever been sober for one day in your life?"

"No!" Big Shot Sun's answer was, not very surprisingly, quite straight forward.

"There's one good thing about this guy," Wooden Taoist joked. "Sometimes he is literally even more honest than Honest Monk!"

"The way of the wine village is steady on long, other places can't compare..." In response, Big Shot Sun mumbled. "In wine the heavens are large, the days are long, why would I want to be sober?"

"You really are a very fortunate man, more fortunate than the rest of us!" The Wooden Taoist laughed and replied.

"Because I'm smarter than the rest of you!"

"Oh?"

"At least I won't spend 50 taels of silver to ask some questions that should never be asked!"

"Where is Mr. Smart Guy and Mr. Know-It-All?" Ancient Pine Hermit asked with a straight face, he never did like to laugh too much.

"Since I arranged to meet you guys here, of course they're here too!" Big Shot Sun answered.

"Where?"

"Over there!" Big Shot Sun casually pointed at a kiln hole ahead of him.

"What are they doing inside a kiln?" Ancient Pine Hermit frowned.

Big Shot Sun rolled his eyes towards him as well.

"Why do you ask them yourself?"

"And that question would be worth 50 taels of silver?" Lu Xiao Feng

asked, trying hard to hold back his laughter.

"Of course! Any question, every question, 50 taels of silver, and also...."

"And also the old rules still apply, we can only wait outside and not go in!" Lu Xiao Feng finished for him.

"Seems like there's some intelligence in you after all!" Big Shot Sun sighed.

The hole into the kiln was small and ominously dark, even a man as small as Big Shot Sun had to bend down to work his way inside. At first Lu Xiao Feng was worried that his head was bigger than the hole itself. But eventually he did crawl in, looking much like a corpse crawling into his own grave, very humorous and frightening at the same time.

After a little bit of silence, he shouted from inside: "Begin!"

The first one to ask was Wooden Taoist, obviously he was the one who arranged this meeting. But before he even asked, Lu Xiao Feng knew what he was going to ask.

"The duel on September 15th between Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng, who do you think will win?"

That was the question that everyone was asking and quite a few people would be willing to pay 50 times more than the 50 taels of silver to know the answer.

"You want to get the answer to that for only 50 taels of silver? A little cheap don't you think?" The one who answered was Smart Guy, Lu Xiao Feng heard him talk before.

"Nevertheless, I might as well tell you!" He continued. "Neither one of them will win!"

"Why?" That was the second question, the Wooden Taoist tossed in another 50 taels of silver.

"The old saying goes that when two tigers fight, one must lose, but that's wrong." Smart Guy continued to answer. "More often than not, the result of a fight between two tigers is that both are injured. The real winner is the hunter spectating on the side."

Quietly listening, Lu Xiao Feng's eyes flashed a glint of approval. This "Smart Guy" was truly a "smart guy", only men of real wit and intelligence could understand to answer that question in such a clever way.

"Has Xi Men Chui Xue already arrived here in the capital?" The Wooden Taoist asked again.

"He has."

"Where is he?"

"In a place that's very difficult to find, because he does not want to see

anyone before September 15th."

That was another very clever answer, but nobody could say the answer was wrong. The Wooden Taoist sighed, seemingly feeling that those 200 taels of silver was not so well spent.

"Was Ye Gu Cheng really injured by the Tang Family Poison Sands?" This time it was Ancient Pine Hermit who asked the question.

"He was."

"Other than the Tang family's unique antidote, is there any other way to combat the poison?"

"Yes." This time it was Know-It-All who answered. He knew the ins and outs of every weapon or projectile in the world.

Ancient Pine Hermit sighed as well, as if he was happy for Ye Gu Cheng. But Lu Xiao Feng knew he was not Ye Gu Cheng's friend, Ye Gu Cheng did not have that many friends.

"Why don't you two ever want to meet anyone?" The Wooden Taoist suddenly asked.

"Because there is nobody in this world who's worth meeting!"

The Wooden Taoist laughed exasperatingly, that last 50 taels of silver was even more of a waste. He turned to Lu Xiao Feng: "Do you have

anything you want to ask?"

Lu Xiao Feng did not really have any questions that he could not explain away himself, but after seeing Ou Yang Qing in the city, he was suddenly reminded of a couple of strange coincidences. Hopefully Smart Guy could help explain all of this to him.

"Is Ou Yang Qing really a virgin?" This was a very strange question. For the life of him, the Wooden Taoist could not figure out why he would ask this kind of question at this moment.

"Yes!" The answer came from inside the kiln, but only after a prolonged period of silence.

"Is Honest Monk really that honest?"

"Yes."

A puzzled look appeared over Lu Xiao Feng's face.

"What was he before he became a monk? What was his name back then? Where did he come from?"

"Nobody knows where he came from!" This was almost not an answer anymore. An exasperated smile appeared on Lu Xiao Feng's face as well.

Even though he was pretty much wasting money, he still had a few questions: "Do you know who that man with Du Tong Xuan was?"

"He is...." Know-It-All's answer was suddenly interrupted by a very strange sounding flute. Thankfully, even though the pitch was very high and piercing, it was very short as well, just a distance toot, and then it was gone.

"Who was that man in black with Du Tong Xuan?" Lu Xiao Feng asked again. No answer came. He waited a long time and then asked again. Still no answer. Taking the silver and not answering, this was the first time that has ever happened.

Lu Xiao Feng frowned and was just about to ask again before, suddenly, a blood red little snake shot out like an arrow from the kiln hole, straight into a bush and disappeared. Even though the snake was small, its movements were lightning fast and the direction it shot out at was precisely the direction the sound of the flute came from.

Lu Xiao Feng's expression changed dramatically.

"Big Shot Sun! Mr. Big Shot Son of a Turtle!" He shouted.

Still no answers. Not even a sound was coming from inside the kiln. Lu Xiao Feng suddenly jumped up and viciously stumped on the kiln. The dilapidated kiln instantly caved in to reveal a huge hole on the side.

The moon light poured through the hole and right upon Big Shot Sun's face. His face was twisted stiff; his eyes, filled with horror, bulged out like those of a dead fish. His tongue was stuck out of his mouth, but it had already turned a deathly grey, as if somebody had suddenly snapped his neck.

But his neck was not snapped, on his throat were two puncture wounds, the little bit of blood trailing out from them were black.

"That snake just then!" The Wooden Taoist conjectured.

Lu Xiao Feng nodded. Any fool could tell that Big Shot Sun was poisoned to death by that snake. Once a snake like that bit you, you were as good as dead. That was not the strange thing, the strange thing was that Big Shot Sun was the only one inside the kiln.

"Where's Know-It-All and Smart Guy?" The Wooden Taoist asked in surprise.

Lu Xiao Feng thought for a long time, then slowly replied: "There was never a Know-It-All or a Smart Guy."

The Wooden Taoist was shocked. He did actually understand, but it was just at the moment, it was not clicking in his mind.

"Know-It-All was Big Shot Sun, so was Smart Guy." Lu Xiao Feng explained.

"The three of them was just him all along?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"But their voices...."

"A number of people could change their voices, some could even simulate the roars of dozens of men fighting a crowd of cats and dogs at the same time."

The Wooden Taoist did not ask anymore, he had seen more than his own share of weird people and strange happenings in the martial world.

But Ancient Pine Hermit frowned.

"So Big Shot Sun created these two men to cheat other people out of their money?"

"He didn't cheat anybody!" Lu Xiao Feng coldly rebuked.

"He didn't?"

"He did take other people's money, but at the same time he solved a lot of their problems. His knowledge and intelligence are worth a lot more than this little bit of silver." A hint of anger appeared on Lu Xiao Feng's face. Big Shot Sun was his friend, he did not like other people belittling his friends.

Ancient Pine Hermit obviously noticed the anger on his face too. He immediately changed his tone and sighed: "I'm only finding it strange that a man as gifted and intelligent as he would use a fake name instead of making a name for himself?"

Lu Xiao Feng's expression turned sad. "Because he was a good man and never placed much importance on fame and fortune!"

--And also because he was afraid, afraid of trouble, of responsibility. That was why he was always running, always hiding. Lu Xiao Feng did not say the rest, he had always liked Big Shot Sun.

"No matter what, his doing this only hurt himself, nobody else."

The Wooden Taoist sighed.

"A man like this should not have died so soon."

"He should have known there were poisonous snakes around here." Ancient Pine Hermit sighed as well.

"But that snake was not here by himself!" Lu Xiao Feng said.

"Why not?"

"Because only snakes that have been trained would go for the throat."

"So you think that snake was purposefully placed here to kill him?" The Wooden Taoist was surprised at that assertion.

Lu Xiao Feng nodded, anger appearing on his face again: "The snake had obviously been trained to attack only once it hears the flute!"

Naturally, inside the kiln was very dark, and that snake was truly too tiny for Big Shot Sun, who had walked in from the light, to see.

The Wooden Taoist thought back to the sound: "So you think the one who played the flute was the one who killed Big Shot Sun?"

"Mm."

"Why would he kill Big Shot Sun?"

"Because he was afraid that Big Shot Sun would spill his secret!"

"Who is he? What secret?"

"I don't care who he is, I don't care what his secret is," Lu Xiao Feng's fists were clenched tight as he slowly declared. "I will find him and his secret!"

The Wooden Taoist sighed again. Only now did he completely understand why only Big Shot Sun could find Know-It-All and Smart Guy, and why they would never meet other people.

But he could never understand how many secrets Big Shot Sun knew that people wanted to keep a secret, nor could he understand how he came to know these secrets. Big Shot Sun would probably take the answers to all these mysterious to the grave with him. Could Lu Xiao Feng really dig them out?

The fragrance of freshly cut flowers permeated the undertaker's shop. It was supposed to be a clean and refreshing smell, but inside an undertaker's shop, it had a way of making everybody uncomfortable.

There were two very high quality caskets made out of nanmu, they looked as if a fresh layer of lacquer was applied on them as well.

"I want this one." Lu Xiao Feng picked one of the two. When picking things for his friend, he always went for the best, even caskets.

"These two caskets were already reserved." The owner of the store was named Cheng. Maybe it was because he had worked here for too long, but even when he smiles, it looked unnervingly sinister.

"People reserve caskets?"

Boss Cheng nodded: "A customer reserved these two caskets for the night of September 15th. I thought it was a bit strange too, he seemed to know that two people must die on that night!"

September 15th! Two people must die!

"Who reserved them?" Lu Xiao Feng's expression noticeably changed.

"He had already paid for both caskets, but he didn't leave his name."

"What did he look like?"

"An old man with a hump back."

Lu Xiao Feng did not ask anymore, anybody could be disguised as an old man with a hump back. He picked another casket and was getting ready to leave.

But Boss Cheng suddenly remembered something: "But that customer di leave two names for me to carve onto the caskets!"

"What are they?" Lu Xiao Feng snapped around.

"Two very unique names. One is Ye Gu Cheng, another was Xi Men Cui Xue!"

The Wooden Taoist was a very happy-go-lucky man, but now even his expression was one of extreme worry.

"Neither one will win... the real winner is the hunter spectating on the side."

Apparently now, one of the hunters actually went ahead and reserved two caskets for them.

"Maybe this is all just a prank." The Wooden Taoist tried to lighten the mood a little.

Lu Xiao Feng forced a smile: "Most likely."

With smiles on their faces, they walked along underneath the light of the setting sun. The gentle winds breezed along, stirring their sleeves and shirts. Those who saw them on the street could think only of how proud and stately they looked. But inside of them the shadow of death overshadowed everything. Of course, all of them knew that this was not a prank.

The Wooden Taoist looked up at a puff of white cloud on the blue, distance sky.

"Have you already seen Ye Gu Cheng?" He suddenly asked.

"Mm."

"Does he look injured to you?"

Lu Xiao Feng did not answer his question directly.

Instead, he casually replied: "With one move, he struck through both of Tang Tian Rong's collar bones."

An injured man would never be able to do such a thing to one of the masters of the Tang Family and Tang Tian Rong was one of the four top masters of the Tang Family.

The Wooden Taoist thought for a while.

"But Honest Monk would never lie, and he was indeed injured. So who helped cure him?"

Lu Xiao Feng did not answer, nor could he. Instead he also stared up at that cloud far far away.

"I've wanted to visit White Cloud Castle a long long time ago, but still haven't had the chance to go." He suddenly stated.

"I have been there." The Wooden Taoist declared.

"I imagine it to be a beautiful place. Come the right time in Spring and Autumn, the scene would surely be vibrant and colorful with all the blooming flowers!"

"There's not that many flowers there, Ye Gu Cheng was not someone who liked to drink wine or enjoy flowers!"

"Does he like women?"

The Wooden Taoist laughed a little, seemingly at Lu Xiao Feng's naivette.

"Someone who likes women could not possibly achieve the level of swordsmanship that Ye Gu Cheng has!"

Lu Xiao Feng did not continue to ask, but a very puzzling look appeared on his face. Anytime that expression appears on his face, it would mean

that he was thinking about a very puzzling matter.

After a long pause, the Wooden Taoist spoke up again: "Since he'd already arrived here, he must have found a place to stay!"

"He's not like Xi Men Chui Xue, it can't be that hard to find where he is staying!" Lu Xiao Feng observed.

"I want to go find him!"

"I know that you are old friends."

"What about you?"

Lu Xiao Feng looked up at the sky: "I have a dinner with someone tonight, there's probably already somebody waiting for me at Oriental Spring Pavilion!"

"Then it seems like we'll have to part here and now!"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded but then paused.

"If a person who did not like flowers or women suddenly had 6 or 7 girls walk in front of him paving his path with flower petals, what would you think of that?" He suddenly asked.

"This kind of man would never do that kind of thing!" The Wooden

Taoist replied.

"But suppose he did?"

"Then he must be crazy!" The Wooden Taoist laughed.

For the life of him, Lu Xiao Feng could not figure out why Ye Gu Cheng would do that either. But he knew at least one thing - Ye Gu Cheng was not crazy.

Dusk, just before dusk. The dinner crowd at Oriental Spring had not gathered yet. Lu Xiao Feng found a seat on one of the scattered chairs downstairs, ordered a flask of the favorite tea amongst the citizens of the capital, and waited for Li Yan Bei's man to arrive.

It was still quite early, he probably should have been wandering around outside, for he still had a lot of people he wanted to find. Hua Man Lou, Xi Men Cui Xue, Honest Monk....

He needed to find all these people, yet he suddenly felt the urge to sit down and quietly think things out. He also had a lot of things to sort out.

The light from the setting sun poured in through the door, taking with them a long and narrow shadow of a man. Seeing the shadow on the floor, Lu Xiao Feng looked up and saw that young man who was angrily staring at him earlier.

The young lad was staring at him again, his long and slender hands still tightly grasping the handle of his sword. A layer of soft silk was tightly rolled around the handle, probably to make it easier for the user to handle the sword with greater force and also to keep the user's palm dry by absorbing the sweat. Only those who really understood how to use a sword would know to do this.

With a glance, Lu Xiao Feng instantly recognized that this young man's swordsmanship was very good, but he still could not recognize him.

He would never forget a face once he had seen it before. But this young man seemed to recognize him. Suddenly, the young man walked directly up to him and stopped directly in front of him. The expression of his face was even scarier than the one Du Tong Xuan had on his face as he walked up to Li Yan Bei. Could this young man possibly have some kind of vendetta or unsettled issue with Lu Xiao Feng?

Lu Xiao Feng could not figure it out, so he just let out a little laugh: "You...."

But the young man interrupted him.

"Are you that four eye-browed Lu Xiao Feng?" He asked ferociously.

"And you are...."

"I know you don't recognize me, but I recognize you!" The young man sneered. "I've been trying to find you for a long time now!"

"Find me? What for?"

The young man answered in the most direct way possible. Not with words, but with a sword. Suddenly, his sword was unsheathed, and just as suddenly, the ice cold and sharp blade arrived at Lu Xiao Feng's throat.

Lu Xiao Feng laughed. In response, he did not parry, nor dodge, instead he laughed.

"Think I'm afraid to kill you?" The young man demanded, his face turning a steely green.

Even though he had not struck, the move he used was indeed a killing move, fast, agile, and quick. Lu Xiao Feng had seen this kind of moves before. Four months ago, in Yan Tie Shan's Pearl and Diamond Pavilion, Su Shao Ying, who died under Xi Men Chui Xue's sword, used the exact same type of techniques.

This young man must be one of the "Three Heroes and Four Beauties" who trained under Du Gu Yi He.

"I won't kill you, only because I still have a question to ask you." The edge of his sword inched even closer.

"Are you Zhang Ying Feng or Yan Ren Ying?" Lu Xiao Feng asked a question in return.

The young man's expression changed for an instant before returning back to what it was. He had to admire Lu Xiao Feng's powers of recognition just a little bit despite of himself.

"Yan Ren Ying."

"And you want to know where Xi Men Chui Xue is?"

The veins on Yan Ren Ying's hand bulged out and red blood vessels appeared in his eyes.

"He killed my master, abducted my martial sister, the seventy disciples of our sect all want to capture him and take him back to E'Mei to sacrifice him to honour our master's spirit!"

"But you guys don't know where he is."

"So I'm asking you!"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed and smiled ironically: "Pity you asked the wrong person!"

"If you don't know, then who does?" Yan Ren Ying demanded.

"Nobody knows."

Yan Ren Ying stared into his eyes.

"Out!" He suddenly commanded.

"Out?"

"I don't want to kill you in here!"

"I don't want to die here either, but I also don't want to go outside."

Yan Ren Ying's hand flicked, a flower with sword petals appeared and, in an instant, struck 7 times, none of them missed Lu Xiao Feng's throat by more than an inch. Lu Xiao Feng laughed again.

Again, he neither parried nor dodged, but instead smiled: "You can't kill me."

Yan Ren Ying's palm was covered in sweat, his forehead was as well. In fact, his entire being seemed to become a fully drawn bow, really to explode.

Anybody could see that he was almost nervous to the limit of his own self-restraint. The tip of his sword was no more than three inches away from Lu Xiao Feng's throat.

The waiters, janitors, and owner of Oriental Spring Pavilion were all visibly shaking, yet Lu Xiao Feng was absolutely still. It was as if every one of his nerves were made from steel strands.

At this precise moment, a rockus suddenly exploded on the street.

"Dead... he's dead...." Someone shouted.

Yan Ren Ying wanted to turn his head around to see but stopped himself, yet his eyes still involuntarily rolled in that direction for a moment. In that slight instant that his eyes were off of him, the Lu Xiao Feng who was steadily sitting in that chair in front of him had suddenly vanished!

This man's movements were even faster than his strikes. Yan Ren Ying's expression changed again as he jumped up, somersaulted, and landed outside. Lu Xiao Feng was standing in the middle of the street with his hand behind his back. Nobody else was on street.

All the others had already hid themselves underneath the overhangs at either side of the street. A white horse was galloping this way from the head of street, on the horse was a person. That person looked like a empty brown cloth bag from a distance, lying on top of the horse.

"Dead! He's dead!" But who was he? How did he die? As soon as he saw this person's outfit, Yan Ren Ying's face turned a deathily pale as he shot towards the horse and grabbed its reins to stop it.

This person's outfit was almost exactly the same as what Yan Ren Ying had on. Lu Xiao Feng had already figured out who this person was -- but how did he die? Yan Ren Ying took the cold body off of the horse's back. There was almost no wound on the body at all, only a slight trace of a wound on his throat -- like the puncture wounds from a snake bite.

Only that this wound was not left by a snake bite but by the blade of a sword, a very sharp and very frightening sword. Lu Xiao Feng frowned.

"Zhang Ying Feng?"

Yan Ren Ying gritted his teeth and nodded.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Can you tell whose sword killed him?" Yan Ren Ying suddenly asked.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed again and nodded. I could tell. In this world there was probably only one person who with such a sharp and frightening sword. Not Ye Gu Cheng could do this. His killer strikes could never be this tidy and efficient.

Yan Ren Ying was staring down at the wound on his martial brother's throat.

"Xi Men Chui Xue... only Xi Men Chui Xue...." He mumbled.

"He probably found Xi Men Chui Xue," Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "Shame that...."

Shame that he could not tell where Xi Men Chui Xue was now. Lu Xiao Feng did not need to say the rest, but Yan Ren Ying still understood.

"Another life! Another debt!" He screamed at the top of his lungs, his pale face suddenly covered with tears.

"Xi Men Chui Xue! If you can kill, why don't you come out!" His screams were desperate.

It was in this desperate scream that dusk suddenly enveloped the world.

And with it the world was suddenly filled with an unspeakable sad and cold feel of death. The dust storms picked up again. Yan Ren Ying, his martial brother's body still in his arms, jumped onto the horse and furiously galloped away. The horse came from the west.

Yan Ren Ying galloped off towards the west, obviously, he was trying to find where Xi Men Chui Xue was from this horse.

Facing the northwestern winds from the deep Autumns of the northern countries, Lu Xiao Feng saw off the horse and its riders with his eyes.

"I know that horse!" A man behind him suddenly said quietly.

Lu Xiao Feng quickly turned around. The man who spoke was dressed in a green outfit. Even though it was simple, he still had that air of authority about him. He was none other than one of those men who was following Li Yan Bei around this morning.

"I'm Zhao Zheng Wo, from the east of the city, 'Gan-Er Shang De', everybody calls me 'Gan-Er Zhao'."

"Gan-Er Shang De" was just another slang for head master, meaning that he was the leader of all the beggars around here. In a city, it meant a great deal of power and control.

Of course, Lu Xiao Feng recognized who this man was and what position he held, yet he could not be bothered with pleasantries right now.

"You recognize that horse?" He immediately asked.

"Only the Imperial Palace could have such a well groomed white horse." Gan-Er Zhao's voice was even lower. "It doesn't matter how much power other people have, nobody dares to violate this pact!"

White horses symbolized respect and riches, only the royal family could lay claim to be the most respected and most rich.

"So that horse was from the Forbidden City?" Lu Xiao Feng frowned.

--Could Xi Men Chui Xue be hiding inside the Imperial Palace? That would explain why nobody could find him. But with the number of guards and security inside the Imperial Palace, how could anyone hide within it? Gan-Er Zhao did not say anything in response to his question. This was one of the most forbidden things in the imperial capital, he dared not to say anything more.

Lu Xiao Feng thought silently for a while.

"Could you ask your men to go find out where this horse came from and who was the first to saw it?" He asked.

Gan-Er Zhao hesitated for a while before finally nodding: "That would not be too hard. But I've received orders to take you to 13th Mistress' place."

"This is more important, you can just tell me where it is and I'll go find it myself!"

Again, Gan-Er Zhao hesitated for a while.

"Ok, I'll tell Xiao-Song, the driver to take you to Rolled Curtain Alley. 13th Mistress' place is last one on the left."

Once he got on the carriage, Lu Xiao Feng's mind was in chaos again. The puzzling questions seemed to multiply on ends. Who killed Big Shot Sun? What for? Why was Xi Men Chui Xue's actions so mysterious?"

Rolled Curtain Alley was actually a very quiet and serene lane with a lot of large households. Not a sound was coming from within the tall walls. The wind carried with them the sweet fragrance of pomegranate flowers. The color of dusk had darkened, night was near.

But this day was not over yet. The last household on the left had the tightest gate as well. Every one of Li Yan Bei's 30 houses were all very secured, no stragglers could be found in front of any of them. Lu Xiao

Feng did not knock, instead he lept over the walls and in.

He trusted that Li Yan Bei would not blame him for this, for such was their friendship. The yard was very big with pomegranate trees and goldfishes swimming about in its ponds. The shades for sunbathing were all taken down and the furnace had been put outside for cleaning. Not long from now, the furnace would be put in use inside.

The light were lit brightly in guest hall up ahead. The flower hall on the left was lit as well. Li Yan Bei was sitting inside, sighing.

On the cherry wood table in front of him, there was several layers of balance sheets. His sighs were very heavy, because his heart was heavy.

But he still heart Lu Xiao Feng. He was already a very sensitive person, and Lu Xiao Feng was not exactly being careful with his own movements. When Li Yan Bei pushed open the door to the room, Lu Xiao Feng was on the other side.

"You knew it was me?"

Li Yan Bei forced a meek smile on his face: "Other than you, who else would have the guts to barge in like this?"

Lu Xiao Feng smiled in return. Looking at that layer upon layers of balance sheets and accounts, his heart suddenly turned sour. In this city, Li Yan Bei had battled hard and spilled blood and sweat for 20 years up to now.

To be able to find a place to stand in a city as filled with men and dangers as this was hard, but to fall down was easy.

Why did he place all of his life's work down on a wager against someone? Was it worth it?

Li Yan Bei's smile became even more forced.

"I'm not conceding defeat, but a little preparation can't hurt, it has to be better than jumping the cliff at the last moment. Besides...." -- Besides, if Xi Men Chui Xue loses, he would have to leave immediately, he would have to leave everything immediately! And this was not easy to leave behind!

Lu Xiao Feng understood what he meant and knew what he felt.

"Xi Men Chui Xue had arrived." He suddenly declared.

"Have you seen him?" Li Yan Bei's eyes lit up.

Lu Xiao Feng shook his head. "But I do know that his sword is still sharp and he kills as tidy and efficient as he did in the past."

The light in Li Yan Bei's eyes dimmed. He turned around and began putting away the balance sheets on the table.

"Killer moves aren't unbeatable moves." He slowly declared.

"I've already said, there is no unbeatable move in the world, and by the same token, there is no unwinnable moves either."

Li Yan Bei paused for a long time at that statement.

"That's why we should go drink first!" He suddenly laughed as he turned around and patted Lu Xiao Feng on the shoulder. "The dishes to help the wine go down should be ready. The special guest I invited to keep you company is here too."

"Special guest? Who?" Lu Xiao Feng was caught by that statement.

Li Yan Bei's smile seemed very mysterious: "Of course it's someone that you would never find annoying!"

On the table were already 4 dishes of fruit, 4 dishes of appetizers, and 8 dishes of entrees to eat with the wine -- a dish of smoked fish, a dish of pickled duck, a dish of crystal pig feet, a dish of roasted goose, a dish of pheasant, a dish of diced donkey, a dish of meat from the inside of the goats horns, a dish of goat intestines, and lastly a dish of singed goat head that had been just brought up.

Lu Xiao Feng blinked.

"Are you trying to stuff me to death?" He joked.

Li Yan Bei laughed again. While he was laughing, a graceful lady dressed in elegant clothing walked in, swing her hips as she did. Lu Xiao Feng seemed to take a step back when he saw her.

"This is that four eye-browed Lu Xiao Feng," Li Yan Bei said, still laughing. "Didn't you say you wanted to meet him for a while now?"

The 13th Mistress bowed politely before suddenly letting out a peal of laughter.

"I saw him before."

"When did you see him?" Li Yan Bei was a bit surprised too.

"When I went out with Ou Yang to buy some pearls earlier," the 13th Mistress coquettishly continued. "Ou Yang pointed him out to me."

Lu Xiao Feng managed a meek smile.

"That special guest of yours is her?" He had to ask.

"You know Ou Yang too?" Li Yan Bei asked.

Lu Xiao Feng nodded. Li Yan Bei threw his head back in laughter.

"Of course you do, I should have guessed. If you don't even a beauty like that, what kind of a hero would Lu Xiao Feng be?"

"Where is she?"

"She's still in the kitchen, making you some of her best desserts: butter soaked snails."

Ou Yang Qing was actually making desserts for Lu Xiao Feng?

Lu Xiao Feng could not help but let out an ironic laugh: "Is she trying to poison me?"

"You think she wants to poison you?" 13th Mistress asked.

"I offended her once, some people you can't offend even once, or else they'll hate you for the rest of your life!"

"And you think she is one of them?"

Lu Xiao Feng did not deny this. 13th Mistress stared at him, not even blinking one bit. Women should not look at men like this, especially in front of her own husband. Even Lu Xiao Feng was getting a little embarrassed, but 13th Mistress did not seem to mind at all.

"What are you looking at?" Li Yan Bei finally asked.

"I'm looking to see if he is really an idiot."

"Absolutely not!"

"I know he doesn't look like it, but he really is a full-on idiot!"

"Really?"

13th Mistress sighed.

"If someone was going to leave a long time ago, but suddenly changed her mind when she found out he was going to come; if someone always hated to work in the kitchen, but worked in the kitchen all day when she found out he was coming here for dinner. If there was a women treating you that way, do you know what that means?"

"I know that at least she doesn't hate me!"

"Even you understand, yet he could not!" 13th Mistress sighed. "If he isn't an idiot then what is he?"

"I think he's starting to look like one to me too now." Li Yan Bei smiled.

Lu Xiao Feng was speechless, of course he understood what that meant, but he could never have dreamt it in his life.

"Actually, you can't really blame him," Li Yan Bei added with a smile. "The matters of a woman's heart is something that men just can't figure out. Not to mention he is involved and doesn't see clearly like those of us on the side."

"I'm not blaming him, I'm just sticking up for little Ou Yang, that's all." 13th Mistress coldly replied.

Li Yan Bei threw his head back in laughter again and patted Lu Xiao Feng on his shoulders.

"If I were you, when little Ou Yang comes in later, I would make sure to treat her..."

Before he finished, a strange flute sound could suddenly be heard enminating in with the wind. It was the same sound that Lu Xiao Feng heard at the kiln yard earlier in the afternoon.

Lu Xiao Feng's face suddenly dropped.

"Going to save Ou Yang...." He shouted. Before he even finished, he was already outside of the window, another flash and he was more than 30 meters away!

The flute came from the southwest, not too far away. After jumping over the western walls of this yard and a small alley way, there was what looked like a long deserted garden.

Chapter 3 - Catching Snake, Saving Beauty

Night. Darkness has fallen, dark like the ink. The Autumn winds, the unkept grass, the lonely white poplar tree. The cold, unfeeling moon rose and shone down upon this cold and desolate garden. No human could be seen, not even ghosts.

Even if there were ghost, one could not see them. Facing the on coming Autumn winds, even Lu Xiao Feng had to shudder involuntarily.

Just before bad things happen, he would always get this strange feeling. He had that strange feeling right now. No light, no stars, even the moon was cold and sinister.

Under the moonlight, the withered trees shook in the wind, looking just like a ghostly shadow. Suddenly another toot of the whistle came from within the shadows.

Lu Xiao Feng shot off in the direction of the sound. Finally, he caught a glimpse of the person playing the flute, underneath the withered tree just ahead. But Lu Xiao Feng suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. He seemed shocked again. The person playing the flute was just a kid who could not have been over 10 years old.

The kid was not tall and wore a torn outfit. On his round face were a pair of huge, bright eyes. Intermittently, he was shaking and wiping his nose, obvious he was freezing and frightened. Yet in his hand was strangely shaped bamboo whistle.

Eyes never leaving him, Lu Xiao Feng slowly walked up to him. The kid never noticed him, looking left a bit, then looking over to the right. Suddenly the kid noticed a shadow moving on the ground, he yelped and immediately tried to run away. He did not get away, of course.

After only a few steps, Lu Xiao Feng grabbed a hold of his arm. The kid immediately began screaming like a skinned pig.

Only when he stopped screaming did Lu Xiao Feng speak: "I'm not a ghost."

The kid looked up at his face. Even though he knew that he was not a ghost, fear remained on his face.

"Are you... you really not a ghost?" His nose was running again.

"Ghosts don't have shadows, I have a shadow."

The kid, finally convinced, sighed, and then immediately began to pout.

"Then why did you grab me?"

"Because there's several questions I want to ask you!"

The kid hesitated.

"Will you let me go after you asked me?"

"Not only will I let you go, I'll give you two strings of money!" Lu Xiao Feng did not really feel like smiling, but he could not really keep a straight face in front of a kid either.

Seeing his smile, the kid calmed down quite a bit.

"What do you want to ask?" He asked, blinking his eyes.

"What's your name, where's your home?" Lu Xiao Feng asked gently.

"My name is Poor Little Thing, I don't have a home!"

Of course Poor Little Thing did not have a home, only homeless kids would be named Poor Little Thing.

Not only does the kid look very sympathetic, he looked honest too, as if he did not know how to lie.

"It's very late, aren't you scared to be out here all by yourself?" Lu Xiao Feng's voice became even more gentle.

"I'm not scared! I go where I please!" Poor Little Thing stuck out his chest. But those who say they are not scared are often much more scared than anybody else.

"Do you think this is a fun place to be?"

"Not at all!"

"If not, then why did you come here to blow that whistle?"

"An old man with a hump back told me to do it, and he gave me two strings of money."

The old man with a hump back again. It was he who reserved the caskets for Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng, it was also he who killed Big Shot Sun. What was he?

"Did he give you the whistle too?"

Poor Little Thing nodded.

"This whistle is alot more fun than those they sell on the street, and it's really loud too!"

He obviously really liked the whistle as he could not help but bring it up to his lips and gave it another toot. All other sounds were muted out once the high pitched whistle was blown. Lu Xiao Feng did not hear any other noises, but still, he was hit with an urge to turn around and check behind him.

Where did he get this urge from? Why did he get it? Even he could not explain it to himself. But in that instant that he turned around, he saw a

blood red shadow shoot up from the ground. It was like an arrow, only much much faster than an arrow could ever be shot.

Almost faster than lightning! With just a flash, the red shadow had arrived at Lu Xiao Feng's throat. It was also at that precise moment that Lu Xiao Feng reached out and clamped his fingers together.

He caught something between his fingers. Something cold, sticky, and slick. A blood red snake!

Its fangs were already out and were almost able to touch Lu Xiao Feng's throat. But it could not move anymore, Lu Xiao Feng caught it right about seven inches down from its head. Had Lu Xiao Feng's movement been just a bit slower, had where his fingers clamped down on the snake been a bit off, had he used slightly less strength when he clamped his fingers together...

Then he would be a dead man by now! Since he appeared in the martial world, Lu Xiao Feng could truly be described as having stared death in the face.

He had walked that tightrope between life and death countless times and met countless ruthless murders and monsters.

But he had never ran into anything so dangerous and deadly as this moment was for him. In his hands was a freezing cold snake, but his entire body felt freezing cold as well. He suddenly had to fight off the urge to throw up.

"Snake... there's snakes here!" Poor Little Thing screamed and ran.

Lu Xiao Feng took a deep breath and threw the snake as hard as he could against a huge rock by his side. When he looked up again, that honest and poor little kid was nowhere to be seen.

The wind whistled through the grass, the withered trees shook. Standing still in the middle of this Autumn night, Lu Xiao Feng took several more deep breaths before his heart beat finally returned to normal. But at this moment another scream came through the darkness. This scream coming from that very kid!

Poor Little Thing had fainted. By the time Lu Xiao Feng got there, the little kid had collapsed on the ground. On a night like this, in a place like this, how could a little kid like that not be frightened when he suddenly sees a dead man?

The dead man was right in front of the kid. It was an old man with a hump back. He had a head of bushy white hair, but he was choked to death with a bright red silk sash. He reserved those caskets, he killed Big Shot Sun! So how did he die in the hands of another? Who killed him? Why?

In the night, the silk sash looked almost glowing red, blood red. Lu Xiao Feng had seen the exact same kind of silk sash before, and he had also seen another man choked to death with this exact same kind of sash.

First Madame Gong Sun's daggers were tied to this kind of sash, the Snake King was also choked to death by this kind of sash. Who was the killer this time? Could it be First Madame Gong Sun?

It was indeed very likely that First Madame Gong Sun had already arrived in the capital. She would not want to miss the duel either. But then who was this old man? Why did he kill Big Shot Sun? And why did First Madame Gong Sun kill him?

Lu Xiao Feng had never heard of an old man like this in the martial world before. He hesitated. Finally he bent down -- there could be something that could identify the old man on his body.

But there could also very likely be more snakes! Lu Xiao Feng's finger tips felt cold as ice as he used those two finger tips to flip open the old man's shirt. No snakes, snakes would have moved in this situation.

Lu Xiao Feng reached in but suddenly stopped in shock. In front of his eyes was the forehead of an old, white haired man. But his hand was feeling something different -- this old man was a woman!

In his hands were the smooth skin of a woman. The white hair was fake, and the face was cleverly disguised. After removing the hair and tearing off the mask, Lu Xiao Feng saw a frozen stiff but still very beautiful face!

He recognized this face! This old man with a humped back was none other than First Madame Gong Sun!

Lu Xiao Feng knew first hand the mastery of First Madame Gong Sun's skill when it comes to disguises. In his mind, there were not that many people who could have seen through her disguises.

He also knew first hand just how good of a martial arts master she was. Who in the world could actually choke her to death? The killer's skills must be even better. Lu Xiao Feng involuntarily shuddered.

He had been in the capital for only one day, but in this one day, he had ran into way too many puzzling and unexplained happenings. He could not figure out why First Madame Gong Sun would kill Big Shot Sun, nor could he understand how First Madame Gong Sun died here.

If there were too many things one could not figure out, then all that was left was not to try and figure them out; if the more thinking one did the more confused one became, then it would be better to not think at all. This had always been one of Lu Xiao Feng's guiding principles.

But even if he tried not to think, he still could feel that, lurking in a corner somewhere in this ancient city, there was a pair of eyes, even more cunning than the shrewdest of foxes, even more poisonous than the most poisonous of snakes, staring at him, waiting to take his life!

No matter who this person was, without a doubt it would be the most frightening and most powerful foe he had ever faced in his life. He seemed to also have faintly figured out who this foe could be!

The light was dim and ghastly. The ghastly dim light shone upon Ou Yang Qing's deathly pale face. There was nary a sign of life to be found on her beautiful face, her beautiful eyes were tightly shut, her jaw also tightly shut.

Could she open her eyes again? Could she still speak? Silently, Lu Xiao Feng stood at the head of the bed, staring at her, hoping against hope

that somehow she could shoot him a look like the ones she gave him before or hurl several insults as before. Li Yan Bei and 13th Mistress were by his side, their expressions just as grave.

"By the time we made it to the kitchen, she'd already passed out!"

Lu Xiao Feng stared intently at her throat, he could not find any trace of a wound.

"Where was she bit?"

"On her hand, her left hand."

Lu Xiao Feng sighed in relief. When the snake shot towards her, she probably reacted the same way Lu Xiao Feng did and tried to catch it. Even though her reflexes were not on par with Lu Xiao Feng's, they were still better than Big Shot Sun's. Big Shot Sun really had too much to drink.

"Luckily you told us to check on her, so we weren't too late!" Li Yan Bei explained.

After discovering Ou Yang Qing's wound, he immediately sealed the pressure points on her shoulder to slow the spread of the poison.

"So the person who really saved her was not me, but you!" He continued.

"But I'm still confused, how did you know she would be targetted?"

13th Mistress asked.

"Honestly, I didn't know!"

"Yet you still managed to save her life!"

"I have done a lot of things that even I'm not too sure how I did them," Lu Xiao Feng replied with a forced smile. "If you asked me what happened or why it happened, I wouldn't be able to tell you because I don't know."

"Even though you didn't know, you still did it," 13th Mistress countered. "A lot of people wouldn't be able to do it even if they knew."

"That's why Lu Xiao Feng really is Lu Xiao Feng, the one and only Lu Xiao Feng in this world." Li Yan Bei concluded.

13th Mistress gently sighed.

"No wonder she would be so head over heels for you!"

Was Ou Yang Qing really head over heels for him?

"Even though she had been bitten on her left hand and was passed out, her right hand was still clutching onto that plate of butter soaked snails." 13th Mistress continued. "She wouldn't let go even if she died, because she made them for you, because...."

She did not go on, because she had already said enough. Just this alone was enough to prove Ou Yang Qing's feelings for him.

Lu Xiao Feng stared at Ou Yang Qing's face, his heart suddenly flooded with an describable feeling. He could not let Ou Yang Qing die, absolutely not! Xue Bing's death had already given him enough grief and regret to last until his death.

There was a question on Li Yan Bei's mind all this time, he finally could not hold back anymore.

"Did you find that person who was whistling?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"Who was it?"

"It was a kid!"

Li Yan Bei was taken aback by that as well.

"Is there a mastermind behind all of this?" He immediately asked. He was indeed an experienced man of the martial world, his observations always seemed to be a bit more accurate and a bit deeper than other's.

"According to the kid, it was an old man with a humped back who told him to do it!"

"Did you find that old man?"

"There probably never was an old man like that in this world, I found one, but it was First Madame Gong Sun in disguise!"

"Who is First Madame Gong Sun?"

"She's Ou Yang Qing's elder sister, and also my friend."

Li Yan Bei was speechless.

13th Mistress could not help but coldly snicker a little.

"At least she has quite a sister, and you have quite a friend!"

Not responding immediately, Lu Xiao Feng quietly thought about the situation for a while.

"First Madame Gong Sun really was quite a sister, and also quite a friend."

"You think so even now?"

"Because I believe the real mastermind behind all of this is not First Madame Gong Sun!" Lu Xiao Feng explained.

"If not her, then who?"

"A person even more cunning and sinister than Huo Xiu, even more devious and heartless than Jin Jiu Ling," Lu Xiao Feng's fists were clenched tight. "And this person's martial art skill could be better than every person I've ever met!"

At one time or another, he had thought that either Huo Xiu and Jin Jiu Ling was the toughest foe he had ever faced as both of them had almost taken his life. It was only after numerous close calls, countless hardships, and some sprinkles of luck that he was able to reveal both men as what they were. But this present foe was even more frightening!

"How do you know that First Madame Gong Sun was not the real mastermind?" Li Yan Bei inquired.

"I don't."

"But you suspect that's the case, you feel that's the case?" 13th Mistress asked.

Lu Xiao Feng did not deny this.

"You are not quite sure why you feel that way are you?"

Lu Xiao Feng could not deny that either.

"You really are a freak," 13th Mistress sighed. "No matter who your foe is, that person is really in trouble!"

"But this time it's very likely that I'm the one that's in trouble!" An almost defeated smile appeared on Lu Xiao Feng's face.

"So where is First Madame Gong Sun?" Li Yan Bei asked another question.

"Dead!"

"And that kid?..." 13th Mistress asked.

"Still lying where he fainted!"

"You didn't bring him back to save him?"

"I left him there precisely in order to save him!"

13th Mistress did not understand.

"You think that kid was an accomplice?" Li Yan Bei asked instead.

"A 10 year old kid would never go to that kind of place by himself at this time of night. Also the whistle was very strangely designed, a person who had not cultivated internal energy could never hope to make it make sound!" Lu Xiao Feng then smiled. "Besides, he didn't really faint anyways!"

"Then why didn't you bring him back here to interrogate?" asked Li Yan Bei.

"He wouldn't say anything, and I won't be able to interrogate a kid!"

"Then you should have at least secretly followed him, maybe he would have led you to the real killer!"

"If I followed him, then he's dead for sure!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"You think the real mastermind would kill him to shut him up?"

"Mm."

"My heart can no longer be considered cold, but I didn't expect that you would be even softer than me!" Li Yan bei sighed.

Again, Lu Xiao Feng was silent for a long time.

"Someone said to me before that even though my temper was like the stones in an outhouse, hard and stinky, my heart was as soft as tofu." He said slowly.

"Forget tofu, it's almost like butter soaked snails!" 13th Mistress sighed before suddenly breaking out a smile. "That plate of butter soaked snails is still out, she made it especially for you, you should at least eat one."

"I'll eat them when I get back!"

"You're going out? Where to?" Li Yan Bei asked.

"To find a person!"

"Who?"

"Ye Gu Cheng!"

Li Yan Bei was speechless once again.

"If he could cure the Tang Family Poison Sands and save himself, maybe he could save Ou Yang Qing as well!" Lu Xiao Feng explained.

A frightening shade of pale white had appeared on Ou Yang Qing's face and the left side of her face was starting to swell somewhat. Li Yan Bei's pressure point hitting techniques were not very refined, the poison's progress had not been completely halted.

"Would a person like Ye Gu Cheng be willing to save other people?"
13th Mistress frowned.

"Even if he isn't, I still have to go, even if I have to get on my knees and beg, I will make him come here!"

Staring at Ou Yang Qing's face, Lu Xiao Feng slowly continued,

emphasizing each word: "No matter what, I will find a way to save her!"

The night was even deeper. Even in the busiest, most late closing night spot, the Bright Vernal Tea House, guests were starting to file out. From the looks of it, the house would have to close shop for the night soon. But Lu Xiao Feng was still sitting there, staring idly at a freshly prepared flask of tea.

He had already walked all over the city and visited many a hotels, yet he could not even find a hint of Ye Gu Cheng's shadow. A person with as conspicuous and famous as Ye Gu Cheng should have been a very easy person to find because no matter where he goes, he would always attract attention.

But ever since that meeting at Oriental Spring Pavilion, he seemed to have disappeared into the city like Xi Men Chui Xue. There was not a single evidence that he was around afterwards.

Lu Xiao Feng could not figure out the reason behind this. There was no reason for Ye Gu Cheng to go into hiding. Even Tang Tian Rong, the man whose collarbone he cut in half and would probably go through the rest of his life as a cripple, did not go into hiding.

Tang Tian Rong was staying at a huge hotel by the name of "All Fortune Inn" off one of the major cities on the east side of the city. Rumours had it that a great number of doctors who specialized in bone injuries and other famous osteopaths. The reason that he was still staying in the city was not because of his injury, but because all of the masters of the Tang family were already poured out of their nest and have descended upon the city overnight to avenge their brothers.

Of course, this would be yet another event that shakes the martial world to its very core. The other one was that even though Yan Ren Ying did not find Xi Men Chui Xue, he did find several very powerful helpers.

Supposedly, among them were not only a lhama from Tibet, but also two mysterious swordsmen who trained for many years in the shadows of Mt. Goddess's Water. For some odd reason or another, these people were all willing to help out Yan Ren Ying.

Neither of these developments would help Xi Men Chui Xue or Ye Gu Cheng. The first group of people wanted to find Ye Gu Cheng, the second was after Xi Men Chui Xue. So no matter what happens in the duel, neither one of them would have a comfortable life afterwards, whichever one of them survives, or if indeed both survives. Lu Xiao Feng did dig up quite a lot of news and information, but none of them was what he wanted to find. He could not even find the Wooden Taoist or Ancient Pine Hermit.

The customers continued to file out. The man who made the tea had already put down the big flask of water in his hand and was endlessly shooting looks over at Lu Xiao Feng, obviously telling him to leave. The only thing Lu Xiao Feng could do was pretend to not see, he really did not have anywhere else to go.

How could he go back to face Ou Yang Qing without finding Ye Gu Cheng? The newly made tea was already cold, the night was even colder.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed and lifted the cup up to his lips. But before the tea could touch his lips -- "Crash!" Suddenly, with a cold flash, the cup in his

hand shattered.

When the flash died down, it turned out to be a rather large three-pointed bone piercing dart! There was a lantern just out the door, holding it was a monk wearing a green robe, white sox, and shoes made from the awns of wheat. He was coldly snickering at Lu Xiao Feng. Of the martial artist in the north, northeast, almost none use this type of dart.

Yet this monk's throw was accurate and fast. From this one throw Lu Xiao Feng could tell he was unquestionably one of the best in the world in this practice. Yet he did not recognize the monk, nor could he figure out why he would suddenly attack. The strangest thing, however, was that even though he misfired, he did not run away but instead remained standing outside.

Lu Xiao Feng smiled. Not only did he not chase the monk, he actually smiled towards him. He already had enough problems to deal with and was not in the mood for anymore. Unfortunately, the monk would not let it go at that and, with a flick of his arm, launched two more darts. The little bit of cloth tied as tal to the dars flapped loudly as it pierced through the air; obviously, the power behind these darts were very strong.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed again. He had already figured out that this monk was determined to cause him some problems. Now, even if he did not want to go outside, he still had to.

Even before the darts arrived, he was already outside. But unexpectedly, the monk, as soon as saw he was coming out, turned around and began to run. And when Lu Xiao Feng stopped chasing him, this monk would actually stop and wave back.

The strange happenings were coming fast and furious now, and it seemed like Lu Xiao Feng had ran into every single one of them.

He did not want to continue chasing, yet he could not stop chasing either. After passing two more streets, the monk suddenly stopped at the entrance of a dark alley.

"Lu Xiao Feng, do you dare come in here?" He mocked.

Of course Lu Xiao Feng dared, there was not that many things in the world he did not dare to do. Even though he knew that he was walking into a dark alley, that the monk could attack at any time, that there could very well be countless traps that he could not see in the alley, or that this monk could very well have a killer move that he had not heard about.

But he still walked in. Incredibly, as soon as he walked in, the monk suddenly dropped onto his knees and kowtowed to him three times!

Lu Xiao Feng was shocked once again.

Smiling, the monk looked up at him.

"Do you recognize me?"

Lu Xiao Feng shook his head, he had never seen the monk before in his life.

"Then do you recognize the 3 pointed bone piercing dart?"

Lu Xiao Feng's eyes lit up.

"You are one the 'Flying Dart' Sheng's from central China?"

"I am none other than Sheng Tong."

Lu Xiao Feng was not familiar with the name either. The Flying Dart Sheng's was not among the most famous families in the martial world.

"I am here to repay a debt!" Sheng Tong continued.

"Repay a debt?" Lu Xiao Feng was caught even more off guard.

"The entire Sheng family owes the Great Hero Lu a huge debt!"

"You must be mistaken, I never owe anyone else anything, nor does anybody ever owe anything to me!"

"I'm not mistaken." Sheng Tong seemed very sure of his claim as his spirit turned more solemn as well. "Six years ago, all 11 people of our family lost in the hands of Huo Tian Qing as our entire family was chased out from our home. Even since then, my parents have been separated, my brothers have lost contact with each other, and I was forced to become a monk. Even though the debt was written in blood, Huo Tian Qing's martial arts was so strong that I could not hope to avenge it!"

"You think that I killed Huo Tian Qing and avenged for you, so you are here to repay that debt?"

"Correct!"

All Lu Xiao Feng could do was laugh at his own misery. Huo Tian Qing did not die in his hands, nor did Du Gu Yi He and Su Shao Ying. Yet people still seemed to hold him responsible for their deaths, be it those who came for revenge or to repay him. Could it really be this difficult to sort out the web of revenge and debt in the martial world?

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Huo Tian Qing did not...."

Sheng Tong seemed completely disinterested in hearing his explanation and cut him off: "No matter what, had the Great Hero Lu not been there, Huo Tian Qing would probably be enjoying a life of endless fame and fortune and in the Pearl and Diamond Pavilion instead of where he is now!"

That statement was not necessarily wrong. Again, all Lu Xiao Feng could do was laugh at his own misery.

"Ok, let's just say that you did owe me, you already repaid it just then!"

"Kowtows are only a show of respect, how could that count as repaying a debt?"

"It doesn't count?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Then what does count?"

Sheng Tong suddenly took out a bundle of very finely wrapped oil cloth and held it up with both hands.

"This is what I've come all the way here to give to the Great Hero Lu!"

All Lu Xiao Feng could do was to accept it. He suddenly realized that being forced to accept repayment did not feel much better than being forced to accept revenge.

He had never thought much about this before, but even more unthinkable for him, was the fact that inside this bundle was actually just a piece of white cloth with streaks of blood and yellow puss all over it. As soon as he opened it, a unbearable stench filled the air.

Now Lu Xiao Feng could not even force himself to laugh.

"You came here to give me this piece of cloth?"

"Yes."

"And you are giving me this to repay a debt you owe me?"

"Correct."

Lu Xiao Feng stared at the mixture of puss and blood on the cloth, not quite sure if he wanted to laugh or cry. This monk fired off 5 darts at him before giving him this stinking piece of cloth, all in the name of repaying a debt. This had to be the first time he had ever heard this being called that!

--Luckily, he came to repay a debt, what would Lu Xiao Feng had done if he was here for revenge?

Lu Xiao Feng's only wish right now was to get rid of this monk as quick as possible.

"Well, now I guess you have indeed repaid your debt!"

Amazingly, Sheng Tong did not refute this claim. But he was still reluctant to leave.

"This piece of cloth might look normal, maybe even worthless, but at this moment, it's worth cities!" He quietly whispered.

Nobody would agree that this cloth was some priceless treasure, no matter how they look at it. Yet when this monk said it, he was as solemn as can be, not a trace of humour could be found in his voice.

Even Lu Xiao Feng's interest became piqued.

"Does this cloth has anything special about it?"

"Only one thing."

"What one thing?"

Sheng Tong's expression became even more cautious as he lowered his voice even more.

"This cloth was taken off of Ye Gu Cheng's body!"

Lu Xiao Feng's eyes immediately lit up. This filthy and stinky cloth, in his eyes, was indeed a treasure that worthed more than solid gold and diamonds.

"In trying to hide from Huo Tian Qing as well as being too shamed to see the world, I settled down in an ignored and neglected monastery. After the old monk there died, I became the only one who lived there!"

"Is Ye Gu Cheng there too?"

"He came in today afternoon, there's only two bedrooms in the entire monastery. Nobody had stayed in the old monk's room after the old monk died and forget about alms givers or pilgrimagers. So the arrival of some people today was a great surprise to me!"

"He was alone?"

Sheng Tong nodded: "When he arrived, I had no idea that he could have been the world famous Master of White Cloud Castle!"

"Then how did you find out?"

"Since he arrived, he locked himself in his room and asked me for a tub of clean water to be delivered into his room every hour, on the hour..."

He was originally a man of the martial world as well, when he ran into someone behaving suspiciously, he would naturally pay him extra attention.

"Other than the clean water, he also asked me to go and buy a roll of white fabric and gave me this bundle, instructing me to bury it."

Of course, there was no way that Ye Gu Cheng could have suspected that in this broken down monastery lived a man of the martial world. So he was not nearly as careful.

"It was when I went into the city to buy the fabric that I heard the news of Ye Gu Cheng's injury by the Tang Family Poison Sands at Zhang Jia Kou only to return and severely injure Tang Tian Rong at Oriental Spring Pavilion."

Therefore he immediately asking for a description of what this Master of White Cloud Castle looked like.

"It was only after comparing the descriptions did I know that this strange guest in my monastery was none other than the Master of White Cloud Castle that had shook the capital to its foundations!"

Lu Xiao Feng let out a long, exhausted sigh. He had finally figured out two puzzles that had stumped him this entire time.

-- Ye Gu Cheng, who did not like flowers and never bothered with women, had beautiful girls paving a carpet of flowers for him to walk on was only doing so to cover up the stench emanating from his wound.

-- Lu Xiao Feng could not find him inside the city because he simply did not stay in the city and actually settled down in a neglected monastery.

-- Of course, he could not let others find out that not only had his injuries not healed, but have worsened.

-- When a lion is hurt, he would naturally hide out in the mountains by himself, for fears that the wild dogs might start coming after him.

Lu Xiao Feng's heart sank. He had hoped that Ye Gu Cheng would be able to help with the poison in Ou Yang Qing's body. But now he had just found out that Ye Gu Cheng might not even be able to save himself, nevermind somebody else.

"When I entered the city, about 8 or 9 out of 10 people were betting in favor of Ye Gu Cheng," Sheng Tong continued. "They are even taking on odds as high as 7 to 1 in his favour."

That one demonstration of Outer Heaven Angels at Oriental Spring Pavilion had already rocked the city to its core.

"If somebody, anybody, was to come across this news, to see this cloth, there could be...." Sheng Tong did not finish.

If somebody was to find out about this, what would happen within the city was not only something that he could not say, but something that he could not even imagine.

"You are right, this cloth is truly a priceless treasure," Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "I truly am not worthy to receive such a valuable gift."

"Even though I'm a nobody, I also don't like owing people anything, just like the Great Hero Lu," a smile finally appeared on Sheng Tong's face. "As long as the Great Hero Lu accept this humble little gift, I will be more than satisfied."

Instead of answering, Lu Xiao Feng quietly thought to himself for a second.

"Where's your monastery?" He suddenly asked.

"Does the Great Hero Lu want to come and meet the Master of White Cloud Castle?"

Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"It's not that I don't trust you, I really would like to go meet him." There was a hint of sadness and loneliness in his smile, slowly, he continued. "Even though we've only met twice briefly, I still think of him as a friend...."

He understood that Ye Gu Cheng must be in need of friends at this moment, and he also knew that Ye Gu Cheng did not have that many friends. At this moment, to Ye Gu Cheng, a true friend might have been even harder to come by than antitodes.

The room was dark and damp. Even though the room was not small, it only had a bed, a table, and a stool, making the room feel even more empty and desolate than it was. There was only one small lamp in the room providing a dim glow. The wall was covered with dust and spiderwebs dots the ceiling. There were scrolls of manuscripts beside the lone lamp, but they looked like they have not been touched for a long time.

-- How lonely a life must the old monk who resided here before have led?

-- To him, could death be seen as an escape? Ye Gu Cheng lied on his side on the that cold and hard bed. Even though he had started feeling exhausted a long time ago, he could not fall asleep no matter how much he tossed and turned.

He had gotten used to loneliness a long time ago. Swordsmen like him are destined to be cut off from the world, just like wandering monks, unable to enjoy all of the joys of the mortal world.

Throughout his entire life, loneliness had been his companion, his only companion. But he could not bear to suffer this type of coldness and neglect that was more frightening than any type of loneliness. Because before, even though his days were filled with loneliness, they were also filled with fame and glory.

But now... The wind blew in through the window, causing the ripped and torn curtain to flap loudly like the falling leaves. The room was still filled with a stench that not even the wind could disperse. He knew by now that his wound had completely festered, as if it was a maggot-filled piece of meat.

He was a proud man, but now he was hiding in some hole somewhere like a wild dog. This kind of torture and humiliation was something that he would rather die than face, but face it he must.

Because he must live until September 15th! The wind breezed by, the night sounded cold. How could he possibly make it through these long nights?

If he had a relative or a friend with him right now, the situation might be a lot better. But pity he was fated to be alone in his life, to always reject other people's overture for friendship. He suddenly discovered that this was the first time in his life he realized that he needed a friend too.

He thought about a lot of stuff he never did before. He thought about how he would always train non-stop in the morning, the blood of his foes flowing out from underneath his sword, but he also thought of the ocean colored sky, the spectacularly bright sun, the beautiful, jade like clouds....

He wanted to die, and at the same time did not want to die. Why must there be so much unresolvable conflicts in a person's life?

Puss oozed out of his wounds again, as the stench intensified some more. He thought about getting up and cleaning the wound off a little and switch the bandage once again.

Even though he knew that doing this would not help his wound, almost to the point of exacerbating it, but it was all he could do.

-- Such powerful weapons, such frightening poisons. He finally got off the bed, as soon as his feet touched the ground, a gust of wind blew by outside the window -- it could not have been natural.

The sword was on the table; with just a flick of the wrist, it was in his hands. His reaction was still fast, his movements were still quick.

"No need to pull out your sword," A person said, smiling, from outside the window. "But if you have some wine, don't hesitate to pour a cup or two."

The grip that Ye Gu Cheng had on his sword slowly relaxed. He recognized that voice: "Lu Xiao Feng?"

Of course it was Lu Xiao Feng. Ye Gu Cheng struggled to stand up, stand up straight. He adjusted his shirt, wiped the frown off of his face, walked over to the door, and pulled it open.

Lu Xiao Feng was smiling at him.

"Didn't think I was going to show up?"

Ye Gu Cheng did not answer, instead he turned around and sat down on the only stool.

"You shouldn't have come, there's no wine here!" Only then did he slowly reply.

"But there's a friend here."

Friend! That word was like wine, a cup of warm, hot wine, as it poured into Ye Gu Cheng's throat, into his chest.

He suddenly realized that the blood in his chest had turned warm, but his face remained cold and emotionless.

"There is no friend here either, only a killer swordsman!"

"Killer swordsman could still be a friend."

The only stool was taken, but Lu Xiao Feng did not remain standing.

He moved aside that kerosene lamp, also the scrolls and sword beside it, and sat down on the table.

"If you didn't see me as a friend, then how could you have put your

sword back down onto the table?"

Ye Gu Cheng did not say anything and just stared back at Lu Xiao Feng. The frost on his face seemed to have melted a little. When a man come to the end of his rope and suddenly finds out that he still has a friend, it is a feeling that nothing else could hope to compare, maybe not even love.

Ye Gu Cheng did not say anything for a long time.

"I don't seem to recall you making friend with me before." He said slowly.

"Because before you were the world famous, utterly matchless Master of White Cloud Castle!"

"And now?" The corner of Ye Gu Cheng's mouth stiffened.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Before a duel like that, you really shouldn't have gone up against a person like Tang Tian Yi, you should know that there's no antidote for their poison."

Ye Gu Cheng's expression changed.

"How much do you know?"

"Maybe already too much!"

Once again, Ye Gu Cheng did not say anything for a long time.

"I didn't want to get into it with him either!"

"But you...."

"But he came up to me and forced me to unsheath my sword." Ye Gu Cheng cut Lu Xiao Feng off. "He said that I... he claimed I tried to seduce his wife while he was away!"

"Of course you didn't."

Ye Gu Cheng smirked.

"Since you didn't, then why didn't you try and explain it?"

"If you were me, would you have tried to explain it?"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed again. He had to admit he would not have bothered to explain anything if he ran into a situation like this. Because type of thing was not worth the trouble, nor could it be explained away.

"So the only thing you could do was fight!"

"All I could do was fight!"

"But I still don't understand, with your skills, Tang Tian Yi shouldn't even have had the chance to move!"

Again, Ye Gu Cheng did not say anything as his fist tightened.

"I didn't want to say this, but the only reason he was able to make a move was because, just as I was about to unsheath my sword, I heard a strange whistle."

Lu Xiao Feng's expression changed as well.

"And then you immediately found a snake?...."

"How did you know?" Ye Gu Cheng stood up in rage.

"Just today, I've had two friends die from that type of snake, and another in bed, life hanging in the balance." Lu Xiao Feng's fist tightened as well.

Ye Gu Cheng's pupil dilated as he slowly sat back down. Both men understood that there was somebody behind the scenes for all of this. But who could it be? And for what purpose?

"The person who would benefit most from your injuries is Xi Men Chui Xue." Lu Xiao Feng observed, after a long period of silence.

"But the person who did this to you could not be Xi Men Chui Xue!"

"I know, I don't believe he is that low of a person!"

"Do you really?"

"A person as despicable as that could not possibly be able to attain such a high level of mastery of the sword!"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Didn't think you would understand Xi Men Chui Xue so well!"

Ye Gu Cheng stared down at the sword on the table.

"I don't understand him, only his sword!" He slowly explained.

Lu Xiao Feng stared into his face.

"Maybe because you two are the same type of person as well!"

Although Ye Gu Cheng did not agree to that, he did not deny it either.

Two unmatched swords, two peerless men, how could they not understand each other?

"Looks like not only truly devoted friends who understands each other,

but also truly devoted enemies who understand each other." Lu Xiao Feng sighed. Of course there is, just that the latter is so much harder to find than the former.

"Supposedly a lot of people have placed bets for me to win!" Ye Gu Cheng suddenly said.

"The odds at this moment is 7 to 1 for you!" Lu Xiao Feng said with a slightly condescending smile. "But still, that means there are still some who put money on Xi Men Chui Xue to win!"

"Yes."

"If I should lose, then wouldn't those men make a killing?"

"You think that the person who sabotaged you is one of those who placed bets on Xi Men Chui Xue?"

"Don't you think so?"

Lu Xiao Feng did not reply.

Even though he did not say so, he knew in his heart that was not the case. Because that person not only injured Ye Gu Cheng, but also killed Big Shot Sun and First Madame Gong Sun as well as injured Ou Yang Qing. There must be an even bigger conspiracy, an even bigger target behind all of this than just winning a huge bet.

Ye Gu Cheng stood up again. He walked over to the window and pushed it open.

"It's September 14th now..." He mumbled as he stared into the moonlight.

"Are you still planning on going through with the duel?"

"Do I look like someone who would go back on his words?" Ye Gu Cheng coldly answered.

"But your wounds...."

Ye Gu Cheng smiled, it was a sad and lonely smile.

"Nobody can heal the wound, so the man is dead. If death is coming anyways, wouldn't dying under Xi Men Chui Xue's sword an honour in and of itself?"

"You... you could postpone the duel again!"

"No! Not possible!" Ye Gu Cheng dismissed that suggestion.

"Why not?"

"Because, in my life, I have never gone back on my word yet!"

"Don't forget that you two have already changed the date once!"

"There was a special reason!"

"What reason is that?"

"You don't need to know!" Ye Gu Cheng's face darkened.

"I must know!"

Ye Gu Cheng snickered coldly at that remark.

"Not only am I Xi Men Chui Xue's friend, I'm also your friend. I have the right to know!" Lu Xiao Feng demanded.

Ye Gu Cheng slowly closed the window only to push it open again. The moonlight poured in like before.

He did not turn around, as if he did not want Lu Xiao Feng to see the expression on his face. The two men stayed like that for a long time.

"Did you know that he has a child?" He suddenly said.

"What did you say?" Lu Xiao Feng jumped off of the table.

Ye Gu Cheng did not say any more, he knew that Lu Xiao Feng heard perfectly well the first time.

Of course Lu Xiao Feng did, he just could not really believe it.

"Are you telling me that Xi Men Chui Xue has a child now?"

Ye Gu Cheng nodded.

"You mean that Sun Xiu Qing is pregnant?" Lu Xiao Feng asked again. Again, Ye Gu Cheng nodded.

Lu Xiao Feng did not say anymore. If a man, just before he was going into a life-or-death duel, suddenly discover that his love was pregnant, what should he do?

"So it was he who went to you to ask for a postponement, because he had to make sure that Sun Xiu Qing was taken care off afterwards. Becuase he was not sure that he could beat you!" Lu Xiao Feng finally understood.

"He's a responsible man, he knows that he has made too many enemies!"

"And if he was to die in your hands, his enemies would not want his wife or child to live either!"

"He never begged in his life, so even if he dies, he still does not want to beg other people to protect his wife!"

"And that was why he asked you to postpone the duel for one month, so he could make sure that his family is taken care of!"

"If you were me, would you have agreed to it?"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed. Finally, he understood why Xi Men Chui Xue had suddenly disappeared. Of course he was going to find a secretive place where his wife could settle down so that she could give birth to the baby in peace. This kind of place was somewhere that nobody could know about.

Ye Gu Cheng stared into the moon, it was already full: "Night of full moon, peak of Mt. Zi Jin...."

"'Night of full moon' is still 'Night of full moon', but what did 'peak of Mt. Zi Jin' get changed to?" Lu Xiao Feng could not resist asking.

"To just 'peak of Zi Jin'!" Ye Gu Cheng slowly replied after another long pause.

"'Peak of Zi Jin'? As in Zi Jin Cheng? As in the Forbidden City?" Lu Xiao Feng was shocked.

"Yes!"

"You two are going to duel inside the Forbidden City, on the roof of the Hall of Supreme Harmony?" Even Lu Xiao Feng was having a hard time believing the location that was chosen.

The Hall of Supreme Harmony was the biggest hall inside of the Forbidden City, so the peak of the Forbidden City was none other than on the roof of the Hall. The roof of the Hall was 27 meters high and covered with very slippery glass tiles, making just standing on it almost impossible, but not nearly as impossible as actually climbing to the top. On top of all of that, was the fact that this was where the Emperor himself holds court and conducts his business, making it the most highly guarded place within the world. And yet these two men had to pick this place for their duel.

Even Lu Xiao Feng had to take a deep breath when he realized this.

"Aren't you two getting a little too brave for your own good here?" He had to laugh.

"If you are afraid, then don't come!" Ye Gu Cheng casually dismissed his concerns.

"You picked this place because you knew that there would not be many spectators, if any?" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly realized.

"To say the least, this duel is not for others to see!"

"Then what is it for?" Lu Xiao Feng had to ask.

"Because he is Xi Men Chui Xue, and I am Ye Gu Cheng!"

This was not a real answer, but it was enough. Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng were destined to meet in their life to determine who was the best. No other reason is needed! Two unmatched, peerless swords masters are like two meteors, if they meet, they would surely result the most spectacular and explosive display. This explosion might disappear in an instant, but would pass down in legend forever!

The moon was so bright that in its luster, only a few stars could be seen. The night deepened some more.

"What you wanted to know, you have found out, so why aren't you leaving?" Ye Gu Cheng slowly asked.

"Other than me, does anybody else know where the duel will take place?" Lu Xiao Feng was not quite ready to leave yet.

"I didn't tell anybody else," Ye Gu Cheng coldly answered. "I don't have any other friends!"

His voice might be cold, but his words were warm. He actually admitted that Lu Xiao Feng was his friend, his only friend.

Chapter 4 - Someone to Care for

September 14th, morning. Li Yan Bei came out of the 13th out of his 30 residences and began walking down the mist covered fog. Even though his stride was still that long, they also seemed very heavy. Even though he was still standing as tall as he was, his eyes belied a tiredness. He did not sleep last night.

In the last 11 years, there would be a huge entourage following him on these daily morning walks amid the mists. But today was different. Not a single person was there.

The Sun had not risen yet, frost covered the leaves and trees. Today was even colder than yesterday, it would not be too long until snow flakes begin to fill the sky.

The winter in the northern countries would always come early, especially to Li Yan Bei. To him, winter had already arrived in his heart.

In the thick mist, a person came walking up to him on the street. Before Li Yan Bei saw his face, he noticed that pair of shining eyes.

"Lu Xiao Feng?"

"It's me." Lu Xiao Feng had stopped underneath a withered tree, waiting for him. "If someone could have a morning walk everyday, he would be assured of good health and a long life."

He was smiling, but it was not exactly a cheerful smile.

"How long have you been walking around out here?" Li Yan Bei asked.

"It felt like around an hour or so!"

"Why didn't you come in?"

Lu Xiao Feng smiled again, this time even more forced.

"I'm scared!"

Li Yan Bei looked at him in shock.

"You're scared? You get scared too?"

"Of course, and very often."

"What are you scared of?" Li Yan Bei did not wait for Lu Xiao Feng to reply before asking another question. "Are you scared to see Ou Yang?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"She's still alive," Li Yan Bei patted him on the shoulder. "It seems like the poison was not as deadly as it looks on the surface!"

Lu Xiao Feng let out a long, relieved, sigh.

"Just you today?" He suddenly asked.

Li Yan Bei nodded, suddenly looking very tired.

"They all have something to take care of today!"

"Then you shouldn't have come out!"

Li Yan Bei let out a little laugh, his laugh was not exactly cheerful either.

"After what happened yesterday, you should be more careful."

Li Yan Bei walked along by Lu Xiao Feng's side, not saying anything.

"In the last 11 years, I would always take a walk around this area in the morning," he suddenly stated after they walked a good distance. "Three hundred and sixty-five days a year, rain or snow, I've never missed a day."

This area was his. Whenever he walked through these old but wide streets, his heart would always be filled with pride and satisfaction, just like a general inspecting his troops, or an Emperor looking over his land.

"If I were you, I would probably take walks like that everyday as well." Lu Xiao Feng understood how he must have felt.

"You absolutely would have!"

"Nevertheless, I would make an exception today!"

"You absolutely would not!"

"But today..."

"Especially today, you would not have missed it!"

"Why not?"

Li Yan Bei hesitated, scanning the old but refined shops that lined both side of the street, his eyes seemingly filled sadness and nostalgia. After a long pause, he finally answered.

"Because today would be the last time for me!"

"Last time?" Lu Xiao Feng looked at him in shock. "Why would it be the last time?"

Li Yan Bei did not answer this question, instead he remained quiet for a long time before asking a question of his own: "Have you ever met my sons?"

Lu Xiao Feng shook his head. He never had, nor did he understand why

Li Yan Bei would suddenly ask this question.

"I have 19 sons, the youngest is only 2." Li Yan Bei slowly continued. "They are all my sons, my very own flesh and blood."

Lu Xiao Feng did not say anything and listened to what he had to say.

"I turn 50 this year, even though I look strong, in reality, I'm an old man."

"You are not old," Lu Xiao Feng tried to force a laugh. "Some people say that men only really start living after they turn 50!"

"But I can't afford to lose it." Li Yan Bei tried to force a laugh as well, but failed miserably. "Because I would not be able to stand seeing my children suffer."

"Did you actually sold off all this land?" Lu Xiao Feng finally understood what he meant.

"I didn't want to do it," Li Yan Bei hung his head as he gravely replied. "But they gave me too good of a deal to pass up!"

"What deal is that?"

"Not only are they willing to assume the responsibility for the debt, they also guaranteed the safety for my entire family to move to the South!" He finally laughed, but it was a melancholy laugh. "I know that the South of the Yangtze is a great place. Every spring, the birds would fill

the sky, the peaches would be ripe for the picking, the willows would sway. If the childrens grew up there, they would never grow up to be an old ruffians like me.”

Lu Xiao Feng looked at him.

“You really are an old ruffian!” He sighed.

“You don’t have kids, so maybe you don’t understand what it feels like to be a father!” Li Yan Bei smiled exasperatingly.

“I understand.”

“If you do, then you should know why I would do something like this!”

“I know.”

“If Xi Men Chui Xue should lose, then I would immediately have no where and no place to go, and there’s nothing I could do about it.”

Lu Xiao Feng also knew this. Nobody with 19 sons has that many things he can do to begin with.

“After I saw Ye Gu Cheng yesterday, I knew I did not have a chance to win.”

“Not you, Xi Men Chui Xue!”

"But if he does lose, I would actually lose more than him!"

"I know."

"Then you shouldn't blame me for doing this."

"I'm not blaming you," Lu Xiao Feng answered. "I'm just feeling that it's quite a shame for you."

"Quite a shame? What do you mean?"

Lu Xiao Feng did not answer this question, but asked another question: "Who did you sell your land to?"

"Gu Qing Feng."

"Who is Gu Qing Feng?"

"A Taoist monk."

"Taoist Monk?" Lu Xiao Feng was shocked at the answer.

"There are many different kinds of Taoist monks."

"What kind is he?"

"The rich and powerful kind." Li Yan Bei went on to explain. "There are two sects of Taoism, the leader of the Southern Sect is Father Zhang of DragonTigerMountain and the leader of the Northern Sect is the Master of White Cloud Outlook!"

"He is Master of White Cloud Outlook?"

Li Yan Bei nodded: "White Cloud Outlook is just outside of the city. Many of the officials are frequent guests of the outlook, some even had become his disciple!"

"So even though he is a Taoist monk in name, he's actually just the richest and most powerful landlord around here." Lu Xiao Feng sneered.

"If he wasn't someone like that, would I have gave him my land?" Li Yan Bei smiled miserably.

"Could you stil renege on this?"

"I have already accepted his offer and have given all my deeds to him."

"Are all those people who were under your command now also his?"

"The real control of these territories is not in my hands but in the Commission."

"Is he already the head of the Commission now?"

"The head position of the Commision is his too now," Li Yan Bei sighed. "I have already handed him the Dragon Flag Tally that was handed to me by the previous head in front of several witnesses!"

"Who found these witnesses?"

"He did, but they are all martial art masters and statesmen that I have always respected."

"Who?"

"One was the Wooden Taoist from Wutang, another was Ancient Pine Hermit from Mt.Huang, and the last was Honest Monk!"

Lu Xiao Feng was shocked. So shocked that he stopped walking.

"No wonder I couldn't find them!" His facial color seemed to have changed as well. "I left and they came!"

"I didn't mention you to them!"

"Well, if they are the witnesses, then you really can't go back on this anymore!"

"I didn't want to go back on the deal, I had made this decision myself!" He stared at Lu Xiao Feng's face. "But you seem like you want to say something."

Lu Xiao Feng was silent for a long time.

"I do have something to tell you." He finally nodded ever so slightly.

"What?"

"The South of the Yangtze is not only a great place, but also just crawling with beautiful women. You better behave once you get down there." He laughed. "There's only 30 days in a month, if you marry another 30 women, your head would get split open!"

Li Yan Bei laughed too, patting Lu Xiao Feng's shoulder and laughing: "Don't worry. I was going to leave all those pretty gals there to you anyways!"

Lu Xiao Feng threw his head back and laughed.

"Then I better come visit you soon, lest you change your mind!"

He did not say anything about Ye Gu Cheng. He had wanted to several times, but decided against it everytime. Li Yan Bei was his friend. If a friend was leaving, why not let him leave smiling? If a friend could be smiling, then never make him suffer or regret. -- This was another principle of Lu Xiao Feng's. But he must clearly distinguish who was a friend and who was a foe first.

"What do you plan to leave?" He suddenly asked.

"Probably after tomorrow." Facing this ancient but endearing city, Li Yan Bei's eyes were suddenly filled with an indescribable sadness and nostalgia. "Even though I'm already an unconcerned spectator, I would still like to know the result of this duel."

Lu Xiao Feng slowly nodded, he understood what Li Yan Bei felt at this moment.

"When you leave, I might not be able to send you on your way. But if you were to come again, no matter how hard the rain, how bad the wind, I will definitely be there to welcome you!" He forced a smile onto his face. "I never liked goodbyes."

Goodbyes always made people sad, even though he did not care much for life or death, he placed great importance to goodbyes.

"I know." Li Yan Bei also forced a smile onto his face. "Even though I'm never going to return once I leave, I would always welcome you whenever you come venture south."

Lu Xiao Feng did not say anything more and just simply walked along with him for a while.

"The Wooden Taoist and the gang, did they leave with Gu Qing Feng?"

"Yes."

"Where do you think they went?"

"White Cloud Outlook. Their vegetable dishes and wine are famous."

White Cloud Outlook felt like it was really in the clouds. Its golden rooftop shimmered in the sun as it stood tall and majestic atop the mountain. The mist had not faded, so from afar, the outlook looked like a palace drifting amongst the clouds. The huge black, ebony doors with knockers shaped like animal heads carved out of bronze were already open, but nobody could be seen. The morning breeze brought along with it a faint echo of the murmur of chants. The Taoist monks were obviously in the middle of their morning meditation.

But there was nobody in the main hall either, only a number of freshly fallen leaves dancing to the wind just outside.

Lu Xiao Feng made his way through the yard, through the incense filled main hall, and exited out of a small door in the back. There he ran into a Taoist monk wearing a green robe and a yellow hat standing underneath a Chinese parasol tree, looking at him with an icy stare. Even though the leaves on the tree had not fallen off, the color of Autumn in the yard was even more intense.

"Is Father Gu Qing Feng here?" Lu Xiao Feng tried to ask a question.

The Taoist did not reply. His glowing eyes looked like daggers piercing through the mist. A gust of wind breezed by as the yellow cape on the monk's back danced. Lu Xiao Feng suddenly realized that on his back was a sword in a black sheath.

"Is Father none other than Father Gu?"

Still no answer from the monk, his face remained completely expressionless.

Lu Xiao Feng laughed awkwardly to try and break the tension.

"Looks like this monk is deaf, guess I asked the wrong person."

But this monk was not deaf, he suddenly let out a cold snicker: "You didn't ask the wrong person, but you came to the wrong place"

"Isn't this White Cloud Outlook?"

"Yes."

"People can't come here?"

"Other people can, only you can't!"

"You know who I am?" Lu Xiao Feng could not help but ask.

The monk only sneered as he suddenly took a step to the side. The bark on the side of the tree had been peeled off and in its place 8 words were written in black chalk.

"Little Phoenix Flew By, Dies Under Thy Tree!"

"You do know who I am!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"The phoenix dies under the Chinese parasol, this tree will mark your tomb!"

"Have we met before?" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly asked.

"No."

"Are there any past misgivings between us?"

"None."

"How about new misgivings?"

"Also none."

"Well, since we've never met before, and there are no misgivings between us, why would you want to kill me?" An exasperated laugh appeared on Lu Xiao Feng's face.

"Because you are Lu Xiao Feng!"

"That seems to be reason enough!" Lu Xiao Feng's smile became even more miserable.

"It is!" With a simple flick of his arm, he pulled out his sword!

"Beautiful sword!" The sword shone like a flood of Autumn water. The monk flicked the blade of the sword with his finger, causing it to make a loud, reverberating sound. Upon hearing the sound, 6 more Taoist monks dressed in the same fashion as he suddenly appeared on all four sides. Six men, 6 swords, all were the same kind of the finest made ancient swords.

The yellow tassels at the end of their swords fluttered in the wind. Suddenly, all 7 struck at the same time, using none other than the Northern Taoist Sect's origin, the Quanzhen Sect's world famous Big Dipper Formation. That wooden faced monk was obviously the person responsible for springing the formation.

His techniques were ingenious and flowing, even though he was still not in the same class as Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng, his sword was agile and moving at his will, making him a master swordsman in the martial world.

Not to mention the structure of the Big Dipper Formation, with the right teamwork, these 7 swords would seem to have the power of 70 swords. Even Lu Xiao Feng was finding it hard to counterattack. The swords were like a net around him. He felt like a fish that fell into the net, jumping up and down, left and right inside the net, yet he could still not get out. The net slowly began to close in.

"The swords are great, the sword techniques are great, but pity the people is wrong!" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly sighed.

Nobody asked him: "Wrong where?" Even if somebody wanted to ask, he did not have the chance. In that instant, Lu Xiao Feng made him move. With just a simple slither of his body, his hand had grabbed a hold of the lead monk's right wrist and gave it a light push. What followed was a cacophany of metal banging against each other as the swords met and sparks flew. Lu Xiao Feng, with another simple move, broke free of the traps of the net.

But also in that instant, an icy laugh could be heard as a streak of light came flying in like a rainbow. This strike's power and speed was far beyond that of the monk. Lu Xiao Feng had just escaped the clutches of the formation and the streak of light had already arrived within inches of his throat.

The freezing cold aura of the sword had already entered his skin. Instead, Lu Xiao Feng laughed as he suddenly reached up and clamped his fingers together.

His foe did not even hear his laughter before his sword was caught. His hands were actually faster than sound!

The aura disappeared. With two fingers on the blade, Lu Xiao Feng smiled at the man in front of him -- a middle-age man with a white face a bit of a beard dressed in elegant silk. This man was staring back at him, in shock.

Nobody could believe that there was actually somebody this fast in the world, this man certainly did not believe it. He trusted that his sword skills was on par with that of Ye Gu Cheng and Xi Men Chui Xue, trusted that last strike of his would never fail. Only now did he realize that he was wrong.

It was at this moment that the sound of laughter could be heard coming from the building just behind the Chinese parasol: "I told you before! Ye Gu Cheng's Outter Heaven Angel and Lu Xiao Feng's fingers are martial art skills that's unmatched in this world! Now do you believe me?"

"We are lucky to see such a display, I am in awe!" Another person sighed.

The middle-age man suddenly sighed as well: "Lu Xiao Feng really is Lu Xiao Feng!"

The laugh came from the Wooden Taoist and Lu Xiao Feng figured that the person who was sighing was none other than Gu Qing Feng. Some people always seemed to have a smile on their face and Gu Qing Feng was one of them. He was already a clean and pleasant looking person to begin with, when he smiled it made him look even more warm and friendly.

Smiling, he approached and gently wiped the writings off of the tree: "Master Lu probably already deduced by now that all of this is just..."

"Just a joke." Lu Xiao Feng finished for him.

"You knew?" Gu Qing Feng seemed surprised.

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"Because quite of number of people have played this joke on me before."

"It's not a very good joke really," an apologetic look appeared in Gu Qing Feng's eyes.

"No, not a very good one, but not a bad one either!" Lu Xiao Feng reassured him. "At least every time someone plays this joke on me, I always come out feeling pretty lucky."

"Why?"

"If I'm not lucky, then this joke won't be a joke anymore!" Lu Xiao Feng matter of factly replied as he gently and slowly put down the blade between his fingers, as if he was somehow afraid that the blade would cut his finger.

The silk-wearing middle aged man also smiled, it was an apologetic smile as well: "I originally didn't want to go through with this joke, but they all guaranteed that nobody in the world could hit Lu Xiao Feng's throat with one stroke of his sword, so I had..."

"So you had to test that claim?" Lu Xiao Feng finished his thought for him as well. He let out a little laugh and continued. "Even if I want to get angry, I won't dare get mad in front of His Majesty's Imperial Warden!"

"You know who I am?" The man seemed surprised.

Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

“Other than the ‘Divine Sword Aristocrat’ Third Master Yin Xian, who else in the world can pull off that ‘Maiden Threads the Shuttle’ move?”

The Wooden Taoist burst out laughing again.

“Didn’t I tell you before? Not only is his hands incredible, his eyes are something else as well!”

Everybody in the martial world knew there were four martial arts masters acting as Chief Wardens inside the Imperial Palace, but only a handful of people have actually seen them.

“Your eyes are something else!” Laughing heartily, Yin Xian patted Lu Xiao Feng on the shoulder. “I haven’t walked in the martial world for more than a decade, I didn’t expect you would know who I am!”

“There are quite a few people who could pull off ‘Maiden Threads the Shuttle’, but to truly be able to extract all the power and force of that move, there is only one in the world!” Lu Xiao Feng added with a smile, this person was leaving a good impression on him.

In his imagination, the Imperial Wardens would surely be the type of people who have their eyes on top of their heads. At least this person seemed friendly and had a very pure and pleasing laugh that made people happy. So Lu Xiao Feng had hoped to cheer him up a bit too.

Yin Xian’s eyes immediately lit up as he suddenly grabbed Lu Xiao Feng’s hand.

"Are you telling the truth?"

"I never lie."

"Then you have to tell me, how does my Maiden Threading the Shuttle compare to Ye Gu Cheng's Outter Heaven Angel?"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed. The truth is not always what people wanted to hear.

"Are you sure you want me to tell you?"

"I know you've also parried his Outter Heaven Angel once before, so you are the only one in the world qualified to judge!"

"When I caught his strike, there was a wall at my back," Lu Xiao Feng thoughtfully replied. "I didn't have to worry about my back. When I caught your strike, there was still 7 swords behind me!"

The shine in Yin Xian's eyes dimmed down once again.

"So I'm not as good as he is?"

"Honestly, no!"

"At least I have finally witnessed you in action, but his Outter Heaven

Angel...."

Gu Qing Feng's laughter suddenly interrupted them.

"You'll witness his Outer Heaven Angel very soon as well!"

"I will?"

"Most certainly!"

Yin Xian's eyes lit up once again."

"For tomorrow night has a full moon!"

"And the 'Atop Zi Jing' is now just 'Atop Zi Jin'!" Gu Qing Feng smiled.
"So even if others won't witness it, you most certainly will."

Yin Xian's fist tightened around his sword. "'On top of the Forbidden', they actually chose a place like that... where did they get the nerve!" He murmured.

"Without such breathtaking skills, where else would the guts come from?" Gu Qing Feng replied.

Yin Xian paused for a second.

"You shouldn't have told me that." He suddenly declared.

"Why not?"

"Don't forget that I am a Warden of the Imperial Guard, how can I possibly allow them to trespass into the Palace?"

"You can make an exception!"

"Why should I make an exception?"

"Because I know you must really want to witness the peerless Outer Heaven Angel!"

Yin Xian sighed as a resigned smile appeared on his face.

"You know what your biggest problem is? You know too much!"

"Truly way too much!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed as well.

"I guess you didn't expect I would know about this did you?"

"It is a secret, after all!"

"It was a secret," Gu Qing Feng smiled. "Inside the capital, there are no real secrets!"

"So you knew I was coming ahead of time?"

"You are Li Yan Bei's friend, after all. If not for you, he's probably dead at Du Tong Xuan's hands!"

"Actually, we were going to go look for you," the Wooden Taoist suddenly cut in. "But instead we ended up being witnesses to the transaction!"

"What about Honest Monk?"

"I dragged him along. I knew you were looking for him."

"Shame we got there too late," Gu Qing Feng added. "Didn't get a taste of the 13th Mistress's famed lamb chops!"

"A monk can eat lamb chops?"

Gu Qing Feng laughed.

"If a monk can't eat lamb chops, why would he be willing to spend one million nine hundred and fifty thousand taels of silver to buy out Li Yan Bei?"

"Could it be because he pretty sure that he won't lose?" Lu Xiao Feng's stare could burn a hole in Gu Qing Feng's face.

"If it is an unwinnable bet, would you be willing to pay for it?" Gu Qing Feng casually countered.

"No."

"And if you did agree to assume the bet, wouldn't that mean you are at least somewhat sure?"

Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"Looks like you are just like me, don't know how to tell a lie!"

"How can a monk lie?"

"Too bad it seems just as difficult to get you to tell the truth!"

"A monk has to master the art of equivocation," Gu Qing Feng joked. "One has to be able to toe the line between honesty and deception. Not true, not quite a lie!"

Yin Xian suddenly patted Lu Xiao Feng on the shoulder again.

"Actually, you'd do well to learn a little something from him," he joked. "Tell a couple of half truths once in a while, maybe even lie once or twice."

"Pity that every time I lie I get cramps and gas." Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

Yin Xian stared at him incredulously.

"Really?"

"No!"

The meditation chamber was actually filled with people. Everyone of them sitting neatly, quietly, and solemnly in their rows, like a room of nice and obedient students waiting for the class bell. Of course, they were not children, nor were they particularly nice.

Lu Xiao Feng have seen them before, every single one of them. These people have followed Li Yan Bei on his hour long morning walk every day since the day "Golden Sabre" Feng Kun was tossed into the frozen river, no one dared to miss one session. But from this day forth, none of them will have to ever take that walk again.

--Just you today?

--They all have their own business to take care of today!

Turned out this was what they had to take care of.

"Well sitting here is definitely more comfortable than walking around," Lu Xiao Feng let out a little laugh and declared. "But be careful, sit around too much and you'll get a belly, and that's not necessarily a sign

of good fortune.”

Every one of their heads lowered in shame, one in particular was lower than everybody else.

“Gan’er Zhao,” Gan Zheng Wo. Seeing him, Lu Xiao Feng was immediately reminded of that white horse, that corpse on the horse, and that proud youth Yan Ren Ying.

“How did he die? Where did the horse come from?” Lu Xiao Feng wanted to ask, but could not. This was not the right time, nor the right place.

If it was anybody else, the best thing would be to completely ignore him and pretend as if nothing was happening. But Lu Xiao Feng was not anybody else.

Gu Qing Feng was just enjoying his wine when Lu Xiao Feng suddenly charged out and grabbed Gan’er Zhao by his collar.

“Now I got you! I finally found you!” He shouted. “Let’s see how you are going to get away now!”

Everybody was shocked, nobody had a clue what was happening. The person who was most shocked was, of course, Gan’er Zhao. He could not figure out for the life of him what was going on.

Gu Qing Feng wanted to step in and mediate, the Wooden Taoist was just about to speak up to calm everyone down. But Lu Xiao Feng pre-

empted any such attempts from them by declaring with a stone face: "I have a score to settle with this guy, a score that I have to settle. When I'm done, I'll be back to enjoy the wine with everyone. If anyone should try and stop me...."

He did not finish his sentence, nor did he need to finish. Nobody wanted to get on the wrong side of Lu Xiao Feng over someone like Gan'er Zhao. In front of all these people, Lu Xiao Feng was actually able to drag Gan'er Zhao out the door, out of the Outlook, and all the way into a nearby wood.

The sun had already risen, risen high in the sky, today was another good day. But it was still dark inside the woods. Sunlight peered through the canopy and straight down onto Gan'er Zhao's face.

Gan'er Zhao's face was already pale as death from fear.

"What... what could I have possibly done to offend the Great Hero Lu?" He stammered.

"Nothing," Lu Xiao Feng suddenly let go and smiled. "And no old scores either, none what so ever."

Gan'er Zhao was shocked for the second time. But at least a little color had returned to his face.

"So all of this was just a joke?"

"It's not a very good joke I'm afraid; actually, it's probably worse than

the joke they just played on me.”

“No, not a very good joke,” Gan’er Zhao sighed in relief and laughed along. “But at least it’s better than ‘not a joke!’”

Lu Xiao Feng’s demeanor suddenly darkened again.

“Although sometimes jokes can turn into something deadly serious!” He coldly observed.

Gan’er Zhao wiped some of the cold sweat off of his forehead.

“If I have found some information that the Great Hero Lu has instructed me to find, would the joke change?”

“No,” Lu Xiao Feng laughed. “Not a chance!”

Chapter 5 - Honest Monk

Fourteenth of September, morning. The sunlight beared down upon the northwest corner of the Forbidden City. Even though the Sun was shining down, this corner was dark and run down. If one had not actually been here, one could have never imagined that within the walls of this splendid and magnificent Forbidden City, there existed such a dark and unkept corner. At least, Lu Xiao Feng never did.

Underneath this spectacular and grand City Wall, was, amazingly, a shanty town with poor and simple little buildings made of small wooden boards and dirt bricks. The streets of this "town" was narrow and potted with one little smoke blacked restaurant after another on each side, alongside little tea shops that sound like chicken coups and little stores whose grounds were covered with eggs and soy sauce.

The air was filled with the stench of smoke, of alcohol, of salted fish, and of stinky tofu, not to mention a whole assortment of other weird smells that one could not place, plus the perfumed fragrance women put in their hair, as well as the strange mouth-watering smell of barbecued ribs and roasted dog meat. All of this was mixed together to form an indescribable and unimaginable attack on one's nostrils.

Lu Xiao Feng could not have dreamed in his wildest dreams that this kind of smell actually existed in the world, he simply could not believe that this place was actually inside the Forbidden City.

But he really was inside the Forbidden City. It was a eunuch friend of Gan'er Zhao's that led them in.

Gan'er Zhao was really quite well acquainted guy, he really had all kinds of colorful and interesting friends.

"The northwest corner of the Forbidden City is a strange place. I can guarantee that even you, Master Lu, would never go there. Even if one wants to go, it'll probably be impossible most of the time."

"Why?"

"Because that's where the eunuch's houses are. It is very difficult for an eunuch in the Imperial Palace to get out of the City. So whenever they have time to waste, they would go there. So there are all kinds of wacky and crazy stuff going on there."

"You want to go there to investigate?"

"I know this eunuch named An-Fu that can let us in."

"But why would we want to go to a place like that?"

"Because, from the information that I've gathered, that horse came from around there."

"Then what are you waiting for? Go find An-Fu!"

"There is one more thing that I have to say!"

"What? Say it!"

"Eunuchs are all freaks, not only do they have weird temperaments, they have this stink on them!"

"Where did the stink come from?"

"Because even though there are one less thing on them, they actually get alot more headache. Bathing, especially, is a headache. So they often go months without bathing."

{I don't know, I don't want to know, I don't want to think about it}

"Are you telling me to just grin and bear it for a bit?"

"Precisely because they are freaks, they are especially paranoid of others looking down on them. So if that Little An'zi does anything that might offend the Great Hero Lu, I'd kindly ask the Great Hero Lu to just let it slide."

"Don't worry, as long as I can find Xi Men Chui Xue, I wouldn't even care if that little eunuch tries to ride around my head."

When he said that, Lu Xiao Feng was laughing. Not only did he find this whole situation funny, it was somewhat interesting to him in a sense.

But he was not laughing now. He had suddenly discovered that not only

was this whole situation not funny, it was not that interesting either.

This eunuch that went by "Little An'zi" might have been riding around on his head, but he had been holding on to his hand pretty tightly, as if to show some affection, going as far as to actually stroke his mustache a little in fun. Lu Xiao Feng could feel his entire buddy almost imperceptibly shudder.

Nobody could imagine what it felt like to be touched by an eunuch unless it had happened to them before.

"And exactly how many people in the world have been touched by an eunuch?"

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly felt his entire mouth get flooded by a sourness and bitterness that almost made him puke. The fact that he had not puked by now was quite a feat in and of itself.

The last time, after he had spent 10 days digging up earthworms, he had thought that he had to have been the worst smelling human being in the world. Only now did he realize that, compared to a eunuch, he was smelled positively like a scented candle. And it seemed as if Little An'zi was certainly thinking about treating him like a scented candle. Not only was he holding his hand, it looked like he wanted to get a little whif here or there. Not only was he touching his mustache, it looked like he could barely hold back from trying to get a little feel of some other places on his body.

Seeing the look on Lu Xiao Feng's face, Gan'er Zhao could just barely hold back his laughter. The fact that he had not burst out laughing by

now was also quite a feat in and of itself.

The stench inside the tea house seemed to be even worse than it was outside. The waiter was also a weird, androgynous, looking kind of a guy, always sneaking a peek at Lu Xiao Feng or giving a wink to Little An'zi. Lu Xiao Feng was having a hard time with this guy as well.

He came into this tea house entirely because Little An'zi steadfastly invited him to have some tea together. No matter what, drinking a cup of tea had got to be better than being dragged around by a eunuch all over the place. Besides, the tea turned out to be truly high class good tea. That and Little An'zi finally let go of his hand.

"I smuggled this tea out from inside the Palace myself, you can't possibly get this on the outside."

"I truly have not tasted such good tea!" Lu Xiao Feng conceded.

"If you want, you can come back whenever you like to drink it." Little An'zi smiled so hard that his eyes narrowed to a slit. "Maybe this is fate, the moment I saw you I felt like we could become good friends."

"I... I will... I'll be sure to visit often in the future!" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly discovered that he was having problems enunciating, for a moment he felt like a stutterer.

Luckily, for Lu Xiao Feng, an old eunuch came strolling in at that moment, forcing Little An'zi to let go of his hand once again and go over to greet him. Eunuchs have an odd gait, their legs always spread further

apart than they should be.

That old eunuch's gait was even worse than the rest of them, but his attire was much fancier. He kept making this gesture with his hand whenever he talked to someone where he put the his thumb and middle finger together like a dancer would. Only with him, it made him look like an old maid. Lu Xiao Feng had to look away to gather himself.

"That's our boss, Manager Wang," Little An'zi suddenly returned. "Now that Manager Wang is back, Sixth Brother Ma's gambling games is going to start soon, want to play?"

Lu Xiao Feng immediately shook his head furiously.

"I actually have a favour to trouble you with!" He managed to force a smile onto his face.

"Anything, just ask!" Little An'zi looked like he was going to make a go at grabbing Lu Xiao Feng's hand again. "No matter what, as long as you ask, I'll do it!"

"I was wondering if you could possibly ask around a little and see if there have been other people visiting here recently!"

"Sure! I'm going to ask around right now!" Little An'zi smiled and added. "I can take this opportunity to go and visit my wife too."

And with that, he finally left, but not without grabbing Lu Xiao Feng's hand for just a moment. Gan'er Zhao kept his eyes down and hid his face

and miraculously held off bursting out laughing again.

Lu Xiao Feng shot him a mean look.

"How did a eunuch get a wife?" He could not help but quietly ask though.

"It's all fake and show, obviously." Gan'er Zhao answered. "But there are really quite a number of eunuch wives!"

"Oh?"

"There's not much for the eunuchs and the maids to do in the Imperial Palace, so they sometimes pair off. Some of the more 'resourceful' eunuchs would actually spend some money and buy some girl from the outside to be their wives."

"Being a eunuch's wife can't exactly be a pleasant life." Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Not pleasant at all," Gan'er Zhao let out a sigh as well. "Actually, the eunuchs themselves lead sad and pitiful lives as well. It's not like their days are anymore pleasant either."

Lu Xiao Feng was suddenly feeling very uncomfortable inside his heart.

"I don't think there is a chance that Xi Men Chui Xue would be hiding here." He immediately changed the subject.

"Maybe he is counting on the fact that nobody would think he could live here!"

"At first, I was thinking that as well, but now..." Lu Xiao Feng let out a defeated smile. "Now that I've seen this place. I know I'd go crazy if I have to stay here one day, nevermind Xi Men Chui Xue!"

He had always been much less picky and neat than Xi Men Chui Xue.

"But that white horse really did come from around here!"

Lu Xiao Feng paused.

"And Zhang Ying Feng probably did die around here too!" He speculated. Looking out into the narrow street and small buildings outside. "It's nearly impossible to hide a body here after you kill someone!"

"So the only thing to do is to ship it out on the back of a horse."

Lu Xiao Feng nodded, but immediately frowned.

"Still, if Xi Men Chui Xue isn't here, then who killed Zhang Ying Feng? Who else would have such a fast of a strike?"

That was a question that Gan'er Zhao could not answer.

The two of them drank their tea and stared blankly at nothing for a while before Little An'zi returned, with some real information as well.

"Two nights ago, Sixth Brother Ma did bring someone here, a pretty proud young man."

Lu Xiao Feng's spirit immediately took a jolt.

"What was his name? Was it Zhang Ying Feng?"

"That I didn't hear anything about!"

"Where is he now?" Lu Xiao Feng followed up.

"Who cares!" Little An'zi laughed. "Sixth Brother Ma is an old rascal, he's probably already hid that strong and spirited that young man somewhere secret already."

His eyes narrowed as he looked Lu Xiao Feng once over again, as if he was planning to somehow hide Lu Xiao Feng somewhere as well. These kind of people, this kind of place, anything seemed possible.

"So where is Sixth Brother Ma's gambling place?" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly stood up. "I've suddenly got an itch to give it a go!"

"Sure, I'll take you!" Little An'zi smiled and grabbed a hold of his hand again. "If you don't have enough on you to play with, I'll lend some. All

you have to do is ask."

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly sighed.

"I really would like to borrow something from you, but I don't think there is any chance you would have it." He mumbled under his breath.

The only thing he wanted at that moment was a pair of handcuffs to keep this guy's hands away from his.

Sixth Brother Ma's surname was not Ma, nor was he an eunuch. He was a tall, burly, and muscle-bound man with a chestful of hair and a pockmarked face. On that face of his was always this unseasonably arrogant and proud smile.

Standing in a crowd of eunuchs, he positively resembled a rooster strutting amongst a group of hens, proud and satisfied.

The eunuchs that surround also look up at him like a harem look up at their masters, with a look that was part respect, part fear, and part admiration.

Lu Xiao Feng could not help but think of them as funny, sad, and sickening.

--The saddest and most pitiful people would always have a little bit of

them that was a bit sickening.

The room was like a nest or a cave, its air filled with smoke and its stench stinking up to the high heavens. Of the people that had gathered around the betting table, 9 out of every 10 was a eunuch, grabbing the dice, twisting their ears, pinching their feet, sniffing their fingers after pinching their feet, pinching their feet after they finish sniffing their fingers, and once in a while grabbing this or touching that.

The House was, of course, Sixth Brother Ma. Standing in the middle of it all, exuding so much pride that it seemed like there was a red light shining out of each of the pockmarks on his face. Gan'er Zhao did not come in. As soon as he got to the door, he slipped out of there.

"I'm going to see if I can find some more information else where, be back in a bit."

He was quite a master of slipping away, not even Lu Xiao Feng could stop him. So Lu Xiao Feng had to go in all by his lonesome.

Little An'zi was actually escorting him by opening up a path in front of him.

"Make way, make way! Step a side for a bit would you? I have a friend here who wants to give it a try!"

As soon as he saw Lu Xiao Feng, Sixth Brother Ma's eyes bulged out. They were filled with animosity, as if a rooster had suddenly discovered that another rooster had trespassed into his coup.

He sized Lu Xiao Feng several times over with those beady eyes of his before finally, and coldly, speaking up: "What do you want to play? Are you going to play for something big or some small potatoes? Something real or just pretend?"

The eunuchs all laughed, their laughs sounded like the group of hens chirping, giving Lu Xiao Feng goosebumps all over his entire body.

{Note: "Goosebumps" in Chinese is "ji pi", which, literally translated, means "chicken skin". So with this final play on words, Gu Long have brought this entire analogy/metaphor full circle. But alas, it does not translate over into English.}

"My friend is the real thing, of course he wants to play big, the bigger the better!" Little An'zi declared before Lu Xiao Feng could.

"You want to play big?" Sixth Brother Ma glared at Lu Xiao Feng. "How much do you have on you?"

"Not much, not too little either!"

"So how much do you really have?" Sixth Brother Ma snickered. "Let's see it before we go further."

Lu Xiao Feng laughed too. When he had absorbed enough psychological punishment, he would laugh too.

"Would this be enough?" He casually grabbed a crumpled up bank note from his inner shirt pocket and tossed it onto the table.

Everybody in the room burst out laughing again. This banknote looked like a piece of toilet paper. One of the smaller eunuchs, laughing, began to uncrumple the banknote with his that pair of fingers he had just used to pinch his feet. He flattened the banknote out and read the note. His eyes almost leapt out of their sockets.

"Ten thousand taels!"

Incredibly, this toilet paper looking piece of banknote was worth ten thousand taels of silver. Not only that, but it was from the "Four Great Eternals" that guarantees to pay out.

Now it was Little An'zi's turn to laugh.

"Like I said before, this friend of mine is the real deal." He puffed his chest out in pride.

Sixth Brother Ma's presence had been cut in half, his temper as well.

"Such a huge banknote, how can we divide that up into chips?" A forced smile appeared on his face.

"No need," Lu Xiao Feng casually answered. "I'll put it all down on one toss."

"Ten thousand taels on one toss?" Sweat began appearing on Sixth Brother Ma's face, a sweat drop for every pockmark on his face.

"Just one."

Sixth Brother Ma hesitated and looked down at the several dozen taels of silver in front of him.

"We don't play hands that big around here!" He muttered.

"I know you won't be able to cover the bet, so if you lose, I'll only demand two sentences from you."

"And what if you lost?"

"If I lose, this ten-thousand tael banknote is yours!"

Sixth Brother Ma's eyes regained the light they had.

"Which two sentences do you want from me?"

Lu Xiao Feng gazed right back into his eyes, and slowly said, emphasizing each word: "Was the man you brought back here two nights ago Zhang Ying Feng? How did he die?"

Sixth Brother Ma's expression changed, the collective expression on the eunuch's faces changed as well.

"This little bastard isn't here to gamble, he's here to cause trouble, take him down for me!" A voice suddenly and coldly declared from the door.

This voice was high and effiminant, belonging to none other than that of that old maid look-alike, Manager Wang.

"Kill this little bastard!" Sixth Brother Ma was the first to jump into the foray, but the eunuchs all followed him in, biting, scratching, beating, tearing.

Of course, Lu Xiao Feng would not allow himself to get bitten by them, but he was not about to start really beating down these sad creatures either.

His only option was to go after one person--when catching thieves, go for the head, if he could subdue Sixth Brother Ma, maybe it would scare the other eunuchs away.

But surprisingly, this Sixth Brother Ma really knew a thing or two. Not only had he learned the Northern Sects' Dragon's Lair Leg and Flood Fist, he was pretty good with them too. His fist strikes were rather vicious and forceful. Pity for him the person he ran into was Lu Xiao Feng.

With a gentle push of his left palm, Lu Xiao Feng was able to parry his strike and, very gently with his right fist, struck him in the chest. Just like that, that almost huge, bulky body of his tumbled backwards. By this time, the room was overflowing with people.

So when he fell backwards, he still landed on some people. By the time he got back onto his feet, his face was pale as death and there was a hint of blood at the corner of his mouth.

This stopped Lu Xiao Feng in his track. He did not put much force into that punch just now, it certainly should not have hurt him to this degree.

How could this be? Sixth Brother Ma's throat was making all kinds of croaking sounds and his eyes were beginning to bulge out.

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly realized what had happened.

--Someone had stabbed him just below his ribs on the left side. The blade was still in him with just the handle sticking out of his side.

Nobody could survive after being stabbed like that. Who did it? The room was so crowded and so chaotic that not even Lu Xiao Feng saw who did it. The only evidence he had now was the sabre itself.

He rushed over and pulled the knife out, causing blood to spew out onto everything. Once again, Sixth Brother Ma fell back. It looked as if he wanted to say something as he fell, but nobody could make out what it was.

The eunuchs were already in a panic.

"Help! Help! Killer! There's a killer here!" They screamed as they rushed out of the door in chaos.

Even though Lu Xiao Feng would never have allowed himself to be captured by these eunuchs, he had no idea as to what they planned to do with him.

Nor did he want to dwell too deeply into that topic. "Thirty six strategems, leaving is the best". With a quick shrug of his shoulders, he literally took off.

{Note: The phrase: "Thirty six strategems, leaving is the best," is a common Chinese saying referring to the 36 strategms that commonly linked to Sun Tzu. In it, it is stated that if all else fails, retreat and regroup. In popular saying, it is often used, as it is in this case, in a tongue-in-cheek manner to disguise running away as something of a strategy than what it truly is.}

"Bang!" With a loud crash, he smashed through the roof.

As he leapt out through the roof, he could see that people were gathering around the building from every direction, some carrying sticks, others carrying knives.

His only option for escape was to scale the wall. But these walls were the walls of the Forbidden. They looked to be at least 40 meters tall. Nobody in the world could hope to scale over them. Even if the man who shocked the world with his lightness kungfu, Chu Liu Xiang, was reborn, he would not be able to do it either.

{Note: Chu Liu Xiang is a reference to, arguably, Gu Long's most famous character. He was a master thief that Gu Long featured in several

mysteries similar to, but generally shorter than, Lu Xiao Feng's mysteries. More than a few critics have noted the similarities between Chu Liu Xiang and Lu Xiao Feng, both in terms of character and plot. A big difference, however, is that Chu Liu Xiang was a much smoother operator and would never find himself in such an embarrassing predicament such as the one Lu Xiao Feng found himself in at the beginning of this chapter.}

Luckily for Lu Xiao Feng, he still had that sabre in his hand. He suddenly took off again. As his body came to a stop about 15 meters up, he brought the sabre above his head and stabbed down hard as the blade disappeared into the wall.

His body was now completely flat against the wall. He pulled the sabre out as he slid up the wall like a gecko. When he got close to the top of the wall, he tapped his toe and somersaulted in midair. With a simple "Narrow Chested Clever Tumble Through the Clouds", he gently landed on top of the wall.

Suddenly, from the top of the wall came a cold chuckle.

"Still trying to get away? You can run but you can't hide!"

Lu Xiao Feng had only heard the voice, but could not see the person, nor could he tell if this person was already attacking.

So with another flick of his toe, he took off and somersaulted again. Only now did he spot the person. Amazingly, this person was sunbathing among the battlements on the castle wall. He was wearing a dirty and torn green robe, a pair of completely worn through straw sandals, and he

was so bald his head was literally sparkling under the Sun.

This guy was a monk.

"Honest Monk!" Lu Xiao Feng almost shouted, and almost missed his landing and fell off the wall.

Honest Monk burst out laughing, a big and hearty laugh.

"Calm down, monk isn't trying to catch you, I'm talking about this little guy." He brought up two of his fingers, between them was a small flea. He let out another laugh and continued. "These two fingers of mine might not be as powerful as yours, but no flea in the world could hope to escape them."

With a little extra force, he crushed the flea.

"The Heavens favours life," Lu Xiao Feng coldly mocked, "why did you have to kill?"

"If I don't kill, then the flea would eat me alive."

"An enlightened monk would gladly sacrifice his own body to feed the eagle, so what's the harm in letting the fleas feed on you?"

{Note: Lu Xiao Feng is referring to a well known buddhist fable. In the fable, a monk came saved a crane from an eagle. But the eagle complained to the monk that he will die of starvation now because of the

monk. The monk then proceeded to cut off an amount of meat from his body that is equivalent to the weight of the crane. This, of course, killed the monk, but the eagle survived.}

"Pity that I only have so much blood and can't afford to feed it to the flea."

"So you would kill instead?"

Honest Monk did not reply.

"And if you have killed, then you probably have killed people before as well."

Honest Monk still did not respond.

"Why aren't you talking?" Lu Xiao Feng mocked.

"I can't lie, so I'm not going to talk." Honest Monk sighed.

Lu Xiao Feng's glare was like a knife as he looked down upon Honest Monk: "You've never lied?"

"At least I've never lied to a sad and pitiful person."

"I'm sad and pitiful?"

"You've been busting your tail running this way and that all day," Honest Monk sighed, "how can you compare to this relaxed and laid back existence?"

"I heard you've been quite busy as well!" Lu Xiao Feng coldly declared.

"Who said that?"

"I just did." Lu Xiao Feng let out a little bitter laugh and continued. "Two days ago you were at Zhang Jia Kou, you arrived at the capital only yesterday. Since you've arrived you have been busy spreading rumours and news for Ye Gu Cheng, standing in as witnesses for business transactions, and now you've entered the Forbidden City." A monk like that doesn't seem to be leading a relaxed and laid back existence."

Honest Monk laughed.

"Well, I may not have nothing to do, but at least I heart and mind is worry free." He countered.

"Well you might not been troubled, but you have been a bit surreptitious."

"I have never been surreptitious or sneaky!"

"Then what are you doing in a place like this?"

"Because I know there is someone here looking for a white horse that

only the dead ride!"

"Looks like not only are your sources all working, you like to meddle in other's business as well!" Lu Xiao Feng bitterly chuckled.

"I have to mind this matter!"

"Why?"

"Because even though I don't have any sons, I have a nephew!"

"You mean Zhang Ying Feng is your nephew?"

Honest Monk nodded.

"Now I don't even have a nephew anymore." He sighed.

Lu Xiao Feng had nothing more to say, because he was caught quite off guard by that revelation. This whole day has been filled with crazy events, every event seemed to have some kind of connection with the every other event, but just not on one thread. Ye Gu Cheng, First Madame Gong Sun, Big Shot Sun, Ou Yang Qing, Li Yan Bei, Zhang Ying Feng, these were all the victims and from the surface, there was nothing connecting them at all.

But Lu Xiao Feng could not help but feel that there has to be one common thread, one common connection between all of them. The person that got to Ye Gu Cheng, Ou Yang Qing, and Big Shot Sun was

obviously the same person, even using the same method. Yet there was no earthly reason those three would be connected in anything.

"Zhang Ying Feng really did die here!" Lu Xiao Feng broke the silence.

"Is that what your findings have led you to believe?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"His death has some kind of close connection with a guy from around here that goes by 'Sixth Brother Ma'!"

"Have you talked to Sixth Brother Ma?"

"Just as I was about to, someone killed him to shut him up!"

"But you don't know who killed him!"

"All I know is that his death is very closely related to one Manager Wang!"

"And who is Manager Wang?"

"An old eunuch that looks like an old maid."

"Why would they want to kill Zhang Ying Feng?"

"I never said they killed Zhang Ying Feng." Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Then who did kill him?"

"No matter who it may be, it's not Xi Men Chui Xue."

"Why not?"

"Because I can guarantee you Xi Men Chui Xue is not here, and have never been here!"

Even though he sound very sure of himself, in his heart he had more than his fair share of doubt. Other than Xi Men Chui Xue, there did not seem to be reason for anybody else to kill Zhang Ying Feng. Other than Xi Men Chui Xue, who else could have had such a sharp and fast blade?

Honest Monk suddenly sighed again.

"So now that you have talked for a while, I've finally came to a realization."

"And what would that be?" Lu Xiao Feng certainly did not share in the realization.

"That, at this moment, I'm a completely confused out of my mind monk, and you are a completely confused out of your mind Lu Xiao Feng!"

Lu Xiao Feng laughed at that remark, a tired and exasperated laugh. The Sun had slowly risen even higher in the sky, shining down directly upon Honest Monk's bald head.

Lu Xiao Feng stared at him, stared at him for a long time.

"I seem to keep running into Buddhist and Taoist monks all over the place these last two days!"

"You are a fortunate person, only fortunate people run into Buddhist and Taoist monks all the time!"

"How did I suddenly turn into such a fortunate person?"

"You just do, you don't even know it!"

"I actually know," Lu Xiao Feng laughed coldly. "Because I'm once against meddling in this business, that's how I became such a fortunate person."

"Oh?"

"Monks are suppose to stay in monasteries and cut themselves off from the outside world, from the events of the outside world. But this matter seemed to have attracted an unusually high a number of monks!"

Honest Monk, the Wooden Taoist, Gu Qing Feng, and Sheng Tong from

that little temple, all seemed to be closely related to this whole matter.

"Monks all wear white socks," Lu Xiao Feng continued. "If there are societies based on green shirts and red shoes, there could very well be one based on White Socks."

Honest Monk laughed again.

"You might be confused out of your mind, but your imagination is still working fine." He shook his head and mused.

"Nevertheless, I keep getting the feeling that there is a monk behind all of this, doing something that would be best to not ever see the light of day." Lu Xiao Feng coldly countered.

"Oh?"

"You are a monk."

Honest Monk suddenly put his mud covered feet in the air.

"Too bad this particular monk don't wear white socks, but meat socks!" He joked.

"Meat socks is still white socks."

"But my skin isn't white!"

Once again, Lu Xiao Feng had nothing more to say.

--Of course, there was much talk he was not ready to say just yet. So he was getting ready to leave. But only when he was getting ready to leave did he realize that he could no longer leave.

If he was to head East, there were two men on the battlements, with their hands behind their backs, slowly heading his way. If he was to head South, there were two men heading his way in that direction as well. If he was to jump off of the wall, on one side was a eunuch central, and on the other side a dozen or so rows of archers and soldiers waiting for him.

A resigned smile appeared on his face.

"From the looks of it, the Forbidden City isn't exactly the best place to chat up monks."

The battlements were exceptionally wide, enough to allow two men to walk side by side without crowding into each other. Of the two men coming from the east, one was an old man with a thin and bright face that had an air of pride and sophistication; the other man had a deathly pale face and a cold sneer on his face. Of the two men approaching from the south, one had eyes that pierced the air like an eagle, even his nose was curved like an eagle's beak; and the other was none other than Yin Xian.

All four of them was adorned in the most expensive of attire, and carried themselves in a proud, stately way that seemed befitting of their stations. Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Well, the Chief Wardens of the Imperial Guard is all here, what do you think we should do?"

Honest Monk laughed.

"Lucky for me, I didn't kill anyone, nor am I a suspect," he leapt to his feat and, still laughing, suddenly asked, "May I inquire as to who among you is the 'Hunan Swordsman' Master Wei Zi Yun?"

"That would be me." The thin, bright faced old man replied.

"And who among you is the 'Divine Eagle of the Steppe' Master Tu Fang?"

"Me." The eagle-eyed middle aged man curtly answered.

"The one besides Boss Wei over there would be 'Star Plucking Hand' Ding Ao. My name is Yin Xian." Yin Xian cut in. "Good day, Master Monk!"

"I'm no Master Monk, just a plain old monk, an honest to goodness monk." Honest Monk pointed over at Lu Xiao Feng and continued. "This guy, however, isn't honest at all. He's the guy you are all looking for, not me!"

"We were looking for him anyways." Ding Ao coldly replied.

"Are you guys going to invite me for a drink?" Lu Xiao Feng actually joked.

"You trespass into the Forbidden City, commit a murder, and still have the nerve to want a drink?" Du Fang's face turned a shade more grave.

He was never one with much sense of humour, when confront with this kind of men, all Lu Xiao Feng could do was force a silly smile.

"Trespassing into the Forbidden City, that part is true. But that committing a murder part is not."

"That sabre in your hand is quite real!" Ding Ao chuckled.

"The one with the knife in his hand isn't necessarily the killer, and the killer doesn't necessarily have the knife in his hands!"

"You weren't the killer?" Du Fang demanded.

"No."

"If he says he didn't, then he didn't." Yin Xian abruptly stated. "I know for a fact this man would never tell a lie!"

"I have never met anybody who would never tell a lie before!" Ding Ao

coldly dismissed.

"In that case it seemed like you ran into two today!" Wei Zi Yun smiled.

Ding Ao had nothing more to say.

"If Yin Xian says he would never lie, then he isn't the killer!" Wei Zi Yun matter of factly concluded.

Du Fang wanted to say something, but eventually decided against it.

"Besides, even if ten more Sixth Ma was killed, it still has nothing to do with us," he added. "Master Lu has probably figured out that is not what we are here for!"

"As for the crime of trespassing into the Forbidden City, you can be forgiven this time, because you still have to break that law again tomorrow night!" Yin Xian added with a smile.

"The Master of White Cloud Castle and Xi Men Chui Xue are both eternal and incomparable swordsmen," Wei Zi Yun said. "Their duel tomorrow night are sure to be a world shakingly spectacular event."

"I don't believe any who practices martial arts would want to miss this duel!" Yin Xian added.

"Even though we are here among royalties, we are still martial arts practioners. We want to see these two generation defining swordsmen in

all their glories as well, to see their unmatched sword skills.”

“In truth, now that we know about this, we should be doubling up security and placing ambushes to prevent them from entering!” Yin Xian offered.

“But we don’t want to be that kind of kill joy and spoiling everybody’s plans. Nor do we want to offend all the heroes of the martial world!” Wei Zi Yun methodically explained. “If a man came out of the martial world, then he’d do well not to forget his humble origins. I trust Master Lu understand that point perfectly!”

“I do.” Lu Xiao Feng’s demeanor suddenly turned very serious and respectful as well, because he just discovered that this Hunan Swordsman was truly an earnest and sincere gentleman.

“Nevertheless, we still have some responsibilities and cannot be lax in our protection of His Majesty, nor can the Forbidden City become the playground of the martial world where people come and go as they pleased.”

“I understand that point perfectly as well!”

“To be honest, the purpose of our meeting right now is to let Master Lu fully understand this point.”

Even Lu Xiao Feng had to concede this point. Below them, at the foot of the wall, the blades of the axes and sabres were glistening in the sun, the arrows were tightened on the fully pulled bows; on top of the wall, there

were 4 men whose abilities and fame moved and shook the martial world ten years ago. If they were to attack all at once, nobody in the world would be able to fend off even the first wave!

"All this talk leads to basically one thing, we sincerely hope that Master Lu would do us a favour!" Wei Zi Yun concluded.

"Please don't hesitate to ask!"

"We just hope that not too many people show up tomorrow night; preferably no more than eight in numbers!"

Lu Xiao Feng finally understood their point. They had probably already calculated, with the power and the abilities of the Imperial Guard, even if trouble was to take place, they would still be able to quell the situation if only 8 people had shown up.

But there was still one point that had Lu Xiao Feng tripped up.

"But why would this be a favour from me? I can't decide for other people, nor could I possibly know how many people are coming."

"We want Master Lu to decide for others!"

Lu Xiao Feng was even more confused.

"Other than Master of White Cloud Castle and Xi Men Chui Xue, we would like Master Lu to be responsible in picking the other six." Wei Zi

Yun explained further before Lu Xiao Feng could ask.

"You mean, come tomorrow night, only the 6 people I pick will be able to enter?"

"That's exactly what we mean!"

Lu Xiao Feng smiled, it was a pained, resigned, and exhausted smile. He suddenly discovered that not only was this Hunan Swordsman a true and earnest gentleman, he was also a calculating and cunning old fox. If he picked who could enter, then if some trouble should happen, he would, obviously, have some responsibility and would be compelled to help deal with the situation.

"Here is 6 satin belts," Wei Zi Yun continued. "If Master Lu should want someone to be able to attend the duel, then give one to him and tell him to wear it on him when he shows up!"

"This satin were imported from Persia and is one of the treasures of the Imperial Palace," Yin Xian further explained. "Under the moonlight it would change colours, so it's impossible to fake!"

"We've already instructed people to start spreading this information to our friends in the martial world!" Wei Zi Yun continued.

"Those without that belt on their bodies, with absolute no regard as to who they are, will be executed on the spot if caught trespassing within the Forbidden Palace!" Ding Ao coldly emphasized.

"With that said, we humbly ask Master Lu please accept these." Wei Zi Yun took out a bundle of satin belts and brought them over to Lu Xiao Feng.

Lu Xiao Feng looked down on these satin belts, which were glowing in the sun, like they were a pile a red hot burning coal. He knew better than anyone else that accepting these belts would bring untold amount of worry and trouble onto himself.

Obviously, Wei Zi Yun saw the hesitation on his face.

"If Master Lu does not want go along with this, we won't force you, it's just that...." He calmly declared.

"It's just that?"

"It's just that with our responsibility to the safety of His Majesty, we will have to close down the Forbidden Palace and humbly ask Master of White Cloud Castle and Xi Men Chui Xue to kindly have their duel somewhere else."

"In that case I accept this responsibility, that way if others whine, at least they'll only be whining about me!"

"So we humbly request that Master Lu would consider this some more." Wei Zi Yun casually offered.

"Looks to me like I don't have much of a choice." Lu Xiao Feng sighed and let out a little laugh at his own predicament.

Wei Zi Yun did not say anything and just smiled.

“Why is all everytime there is some terribly trouble some thing to do, it always falls to me?” Lu Xiao Feng sighed again and mumbled to himself.

Honest Monk suddenly laughed.

“Because you are Lu Xiao Feng.”

And that seemed to be reason enough.

With the belts resting comfortably on his shoulders, Lu Xiao Feng slowly made his way down the wall. The army of soldiers that was waiting below the walls had suddenly disappeared with the same efficiency with which they appeared. The Imperial Guards of the Forbidden City were, of course, some of the best trained troops in the world.

Although their individual martial arts skills might not be great, but their strong bows and sharp blades, along with their tactical placement and movement, would make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a martial art master of any kind to be able to fend them off. On top of that, other than Wei Zi Yun and the other Chief Wardens, there were probably many more masters amongst the Imperial Guards.

“Other than the 6 people you picked, anyone else caught trespassing

inside the Forbidden City would be executed on the spot without exception!"

"Do you believe what they said?" He suddenly asked.

Honest Monk was walking in front of him, his head snapped back at the question.

"Which part?"

"If you didn't have a belt, would you dare enter the Forbidden City tomorrow night?"

Honest Monk smiled.

"I don't have the courage, but I do have a belt."

"You have a belt? Where?"

"Over there on your shoulder."

Lu Xiao Feng smiled as well.

"Why must I give you a belt?"

"Because I'm a monk, an honest to goodness monk."

"That seems like a good enough reason," Lu Xiao Feng nodded with a laugh.

"More than enough."

Lu Xiao Feng picked out one belt and placed it on Honest Monk's shoulder.

"You should probably change your outfit!" He mused.

"Why?"

"This belt's color doesn't match your outfit!"

"No matter, we monks don't care about that. Besides, this belt's color is going to change anyways!"

"I just want to remind you that while you can change your outfit, you can't change that belt." Lu Xiao Feng matter of factly observed.

Honest Monk laughed again.

"You give me something, I'll give you something back," he suddenly offered. "Because you gave me this belt, I'll give you something as well."

"What?"

"A sentence."

"I'm listening."

Honest Monk gave Lu Xiao Feng one quick look over and began: "Your eyes are dark, the color of your face is like dirt, my advice to you is quickly go find a place to get some sleep, preferably sleep all the way until tomorrow night. Else...."

"Else what?"

Honest Monk sighed.

"Even if a dead man has 5 belts on him, he still won't get in the Forbidden City."

"Is that a threat? Or a warning?"

"It's just the honest truth, everything I say is just the honest truth."

Honest Monk went off. Lu Xiao Feng suddenly realized that his gait was very odd as well, odd like those eunuchs.

--Are monks not that different from eunuchs?

--But monks could still secretly go and visit prostitutes!

--If eunuchs could have wives, why could monks not go visit prostitutes?

Lu Xiao Feng sighed and decided not to think about that matter anymore, he still had much more pressing matter to ponder.

The Wooden Taoist, Gu Qing Feng, Ancient Pine Hermit, Li Yan Bei, Hua Man Lou, Yan Ren Ying, the Tang brothers, the lamas, those mysterious swordsmen, not to mention all the other masters from the 7 main sword sects.

None of them would probably want to miss out on tomorrow night's duel, yet there were only 5 belts left. What would be the right way to distribute these belts? Maybe there was no right way to distribute them.

Lu Xiao Feng could not help but sigh again.

"Those who didn't get a belt might come for my life," he mumbled to himself. "Looks like I really should just sleep all the way until tomorrow night!"

Chapter 6 - Escape from Death's Door

There are only two kind of people who can sleep for some 40 straight hours -- those who are lucky and those who are ill. Lu Xiao Feng was not ill, nor was he that lucky. By now, Ou Yang Qing had been in a coma for a day and a night. Once he saw the color on her face, it became even more impossible for Lu Xiao Feng to fall asleep.

The 13th Mistress was very worried as well.

"Since last night, she's only woken up once, and only said one sentence!" She whispered.

"What did she say?"

A strained smile appeared on the 13th Mistress' face.

"She asked me if you liked her butter soaked snail shells."

Lu Xiao Feng's heart shrunk. Looking over at that plate of butter soaked snail shells on the table, he suddenly could not help but feel like he was truly a unsentimental bastard.

"I'm sure I'd like them," he also force a strained smile onto his face. "I'm sure I'd eat all of them."

"Once these cool down they won't be crisp anymore, let me go and warm them up for you."

"No need, she made these, I'll eat them like this!"

The 13th Mistress sighed.

"Finally, you show some signs of having a heart."

Lu Xiao Feng sat down and, in one motion, toss two in his mouth.

"Where's Li Yan Bei?" He abruptly asked.

"He left."

"Where did he go?"

"Don't know," her smile became even more strained. "He has more than one house."

Lu Xiao Feng was left to stuffed another snail shell in his mouth. He suddenly noticed that the expensive make up on the 13th Mistress' face seemed to be hiding an untold amount of tears and sadness.

The loneliness of a woman who had to spend 29 nights a month alone could not possibly be easy to bear.

Yet she did, because she had to. This was her fate, most women have the ability and perseverance to accept their fate. In this way, they are

much stronger than men. He understood 13th Mistress, but he could not understand Ou Yang Qing.

"I shouldn't ask this," he hesitated before continuing. "But I have to ask!"

"Then ask."

"You and Ou Yang Qing are great friends, and there shouldn't be any secrets among friends, besides...."

"Besides we are women, there are even less secrets amongst women." 13th Mistress finished for him.

Lu Xiao Feng forced another strained smile onto his face.

"So you probably know alot about her private matters!"

"What is it do you really want to ask?"

"I heard First Madame Gong Sun say once, that she was still a virgin," Lu Xiao Feng finally gathered enough courage to ask, "is she really?"

"She is." 13th Mistress did not even pause before answering.

"She's in that business, how could she still be a virgin?"

"There are plenty of good women in that business," 13th Mistress coldly

snickered. "Not only is she a good woman, she's a very special one!"

Lu Xiao Feng stuff his mouth full of snail shells again to excuse himself. By now, he had obviously figured out that the 13th Mistress was in that business as well. That was how they became good friends.

Women like them would very rarely make friends with those "good and proper" family women. Not because they look down on others, but because they are deathly afraid of being looked down upon.

Lu Xiao Feng finished the entire plate of snail shells, as if he could not face himself if he had left just one uneaten.

The 13th Mistress watched him finish before suddenly inquiring: "Why are you so concerned about that? Whether or not she's a virgin? Does it have anything to do with someone else?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"Four or 5 months ago, I ran into Honest Monk one day." He slowly explained. "He said he spent the night before with Ou Yang...."

He did not finish his sentence. Abruptly, he collapsed and passed out. How could the 13th Mistress so coldly watch him collapse like that? Was that really a hint of a sinister smile on her face?

In truth, Lu Xiao Feng did not remotely understand women, understood the kind of women like 13th Mistress even less. He only thought he knew alot about women.

No matter who, if a man thinks he really understood women, then he is doomed to a bad fate. Even if he was Lu Xiao Feng.

The strange thing is, some people just seemed to be favoured by the Heavens. Even if they get unlucky, they do not stay that way for long. Obviously, Lu Xiao Feng was one of these kind of people. Incredibly, he did not die. When he woke up, not only did he find that he had the control of all of his limbs and that his facilities were all in order, he found himself lying on a very comfortable and clean bed.

The room was very clean as well, and the smell of chrysanthemums and osmanthus permeated throughout the room. The lantern was already lit on the table. Outside the window the moonlight was pure like water. A person quietly stood outside the window, facing the Autumn moon, his attire was white as snow.

"Xi Men Chui Xue!"

Lu Xiao Feng almost literally wore through his soles searching for Xi Men Chui Xue, so how did he suddenly appear here and now? He leapt to his feet. Amazingly, he could still leap to his feat, it was just that his legs were still slightly weak. Obviously his strength still had not fully returned.

"You little bastard, which hole did you just crawl out of?" Lu Xiao Feng shouted, standing there barefoot. "Where have you been hiding these last couple of days?"

"A person shouldn't talk to his savior like that!" Xi Men Chui Xue coldly countered.

"Savior?" He was still shouting. "You saved my life?"

"If not for me, you'd probably end up just like Li Yan Bei, burned to ash!"

"Li Yan Bei died?" Lu Xiao Feng shouted.

"His luck isn't as good as yours, you seemed have just been born was exceptional luck."

He finally turned around and looked back into Lu Xiao Feng's eyes. His face was still that same pale and cold face, his voice was still that cold voice, but his eyes had a hint of warmth. The kind of warmth that one could only find in the eyes of a long lost friend.

Lu Xiao Feng was staring right back into his eyes.

"Your luck doesn't seem to be too bad recently either."

"Seems like the only person with truly bad luck is Li Yan Bei."

"Do you know how he died?"

Xi Men Chui Xue nodded.

"But I don't know when you started trusting that type of women!"

"Which type of women?" Lu Xiao Feng laid back down, because his stomach suddenly began to feel very uncomfortable. "The type of women like Ou Yang Qing?"

"Not Ou Yang Qing."

"Not her? 13th Mistress?"

"The butter soaked snail shells were made by Ou Yang Qing, but the poison was applied by 13th Mistress." Xi Men Chui Xue looked down at Lu Xiao Feng, a hint of smile seemingly appearing in his eyes. "Does that new make you feel a bit better?"

Lu Xiao Feng really did feel a lot better, but he was still a bit confused.

"Since when did you know anything about the feelings between men and women?"

Xi Men Chui Xue did not answer his question, instead he just turned to once again face the moon. The moonlight washed down from the Heavens like spring water. It was now the night of September 14th.

"I must have slept for a long time!" Lu Xiao Feng deduced.

"The 13th Mistress is quite the expert when it comes to applying

sleeping potions, she did not apply much in those butter soaked snail shells!"

"Because she knew if she put in too much I would notice."

"And because she knew you would surely eat that entire plate of it."

Lu Xiao Feng let out a defeated laugh. Obviously, the 13th Mistress was much more of an expert than he was about these things.

"But how would you know about this?" He asked. "How did you just happen to save me?"

"When you collapsed, I was watching from outside the window."

"You saw me collapse?"

"I didn't expect you to collapse, nor did I know there was something in those snail shells!"

"Because you were just coming to talk to me?"

"But I did not want anybody else to see me. I had planned on waiting until the 13th Mistress left to enter. But as soon as you collapsed, she pulled out a dagger."

"Did Li Yan Bei die from the same dagger?"

Xi Men Chui Xue nodded.

"Did you interrogate her? Are you sure she told the truth?"

"Very few people dare to tell a lie to my face!" Xi Men Chui Xue coldly observed.

Everybody knew that Xi Men Chui Xue would never take back his words once he threatened to kill. His hands had only touched his sword before 13th Mistress began spilling the truth.

"I really did not think a woman like her was capable of really killing a person!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed and smiled at his bad judgement.

"Why aren't you asking me why she would do that?"

"Because I know why she did it," Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "I still remember something she told me."

"What did she tell you?"

"Li Yan Bei had more women than her. She isn't a woman who can suffer through a lonely life. She can't go on living like that, nor could she run away, so she had to kill Li Yan Bei." With a sad smile, he continued. "She was afraid that I might try and get to the bottom to what happened to him, that's why she did it."

"You forgot one thing!"

"Oh?"

"A one million nine hundred and fifty thousand tael banknote." He snickered. "Without that banknote, she wouldn't have gone through with it, nor would she have dared!"

But, with that banknote, there was not many places in the world a woman like her could not go, and not many things she would not dare do.

"She had planned on leaving with that banknote as soon as she killed you, she even already packed."

"Of course, a person with a one million nine hundred and fifty thousand tael banknote doesn't need to pack too much stuff." Lu Xiao Feng let out a defeated laugh.

"Why aren't you asking me what happened to her?"

"Do I need to ask?"

Nobody like this had ever been able to walk away alive from a meeting with Xi Men Chui Xue's sword.

"You are wrong," Xi Men Chui Xue casually replied. "I didn't kill her."

Lu Xiao Feng's head snapped up in surprise.

"You didn't kill her? Why not?"

Xi Men Chui Xue did not answer, nor did he need to.

And Lu Xiao Feng already knew the answer as well: "You have changed... and changed quite a bit!"

He stared at Xi Men Chui Xue with a smile in his eyes.

"How did you change? Changing a person like you isn't easy."

"And you still haven't changed." Xi Men Chui Xue coldly responded.
"Not asking any of the questions you should be asking and asking every single one of those you shouldn't!"

Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"I really do have some question that I want to ask you." He had to admit.

"Then you better start asking them."

"Where's Ou Yang Qing?"

"She's here, someone is taking care of her right now."

"Miss Sun?"

"No." That warmth reappeared in Xi Men Chui Xue's eyes. "Madame Xi Men."

Lu Xiao Feng could barely contain his joy.

"Congrats. Congrats. Congrats...." He congratulated Xi Men Chui Xue about seven or eight times in a row. He was truly happy for Xi Men Chui Xue, for Sun Xiu Qing. The happiness and good fortune of one's friends will always feel the same as the happiness and good fortune of one's self.

--Lu Xiao Feng was truly a lovable guy. Even Xi Men Chui Xue could not help but let out a little laugh and smile. He rarely ever smile, but when he did, it felt like the Spring breeze descending upon the land.

"You didn't expect I would start a family?"

"I really didn't." Lu Xiao Feng was still having a hard time wiping that smile off his face. "Not in my wildest dreams."

But he had already figured out this was the reason behind all these changes to Xi Men Chui Xue.

"How about you? When do you plan on starting your own family?" Xi Men Chui Xue asked with a smile.

Lu Xiao Feng's smile was immediately shrouded by a shadow -- Xue Bing's shadow, and also Ou Yang Qing's shadow.

"Why would you go search for me there?" He immediately changed the topic.

"I knew you were Li Yan Bei's friend, and I also knew he had a few trusted underlings!"

"They didn't dare to tell you lies either?"

"Not a chance!"

"And they didn't dare leak your whereabouts?"

"I found them, nobody knows I'm living here."

And this was the question that Lu Xiao Feng most wanted to ask.

"So where is here exactly?"

"Why don't you go out and take a look?"

Across the delicate and classy garden, there was actually a bakery. On the front door, which was a double door, was carved some very delicate designs. Above the door, written in gold coloured characters, was written: "Delicious Fragrant Vegetarians." Lu Xiao Feng took one look and

returned. He was still laughing when he got back.

"This is a very old bakery, and the people who work and frequent here are all from my hometown." Xi Men Chui Xue said with a measure of pride on his face. "Did you ever expect me to be the owner of a bakery?"

"Never."

"Have you ever seen anyone from the martial world buy flour?"

"Never."

"That why even if you searched through every city in the land, you still wouldn't find me!" Xi Men Chui Xue smiled.

"I won't find you even if you smashed open my head!" Lu Xiao Feng conceded.

"Do you already know why I've done this?"

"I do." Lu Xiao Feng smiled. "That's why not only am I going to drink your toast, I'm going to wait to eat your red egg!"

{Note: Here Lu Xiao Feng is referring to Xi Men Chui Xue's wedding and the birth of his child. Inviting someone over to drink "Xi Jiu", or literally "Happiness Wine", is a catch-all saying for inviting someone to celebrate one's wedding. Just as "Hong Dan", or "Red Egg", applies to the birth of one's child among men.}

But a shadow appeared in Xi Men Chui Xue's smile as well.

"I went looking for you because I have a favour to ask of you." After a long pause, he finally and slowly said. Why would he change the topic? Could it be because he was afraid to think too far into the future? Because he was scared that he might not live until that day?

"Anything, just ask. I owe you."

"I want you to accompany me to the Forbidden City tomorrow." Xi Men Chui Xue's fists tightened. "If I should lose, I want you to bring my body back here."

Lu Xiao Feng's smile turned very strained.

"Even if you lose, that doesn't necessarily mean death."

"In defeat, there is only death!" Xi Men Chui Xue's expression was both proud, cruel, and resolute. He could accept death, but could not accept defeat!

Lu Xiao Feng hesitated. He did not want to reveal Ye Gu Cheng's secret to Xi Men Chui Xue, for Ye Gu Cheng was his friend as well.

But even if he did not say it, the fact would still not change. Sooner or later, Xi Men Chui Xue would find out.

"You won't lose!" He finally blurted out.

"Why not?"

"Because Ye Gu Cheng's wounds are pretty serious."

Xi Men Chui Xue was shocked.

"But I heard that only yesterday he had severely wounded Tang Tian Rong at Oriental Spring Pavilion."

"Tang Tian Rong is not Xi Men Chui Xue."

"So his injuries are real?"

"Yes."

The color on Xi Men Chui Xue's changed. If anybody else found out that their only foe had suffered heavy injuries would surely feel fortunate and happy. But Xi Men Chui Xue was not anybody else!

Not only did the color on his face change, it changed dramatically to a sickening shade.

"If it wasn't because of me, we would have already dueled on the 15th of August, and maybe I would have already died under his sword. But now..."

"Now he must die?"

Xi Men Chui Xue nodded.

"Can't you not kill him?"

"Even if I don't kill him, he will still die without a doubt!" Xi Men Chui Xue somberly replied.

"But...."

"Maybe you don't understand people like us," Xi Men Chui Xue cut him off.
"We can die, we can't lose!"

Lu Xiao Feng let out a long, drawn out sigh. It was not that he did not understand them, he had known a long time ago that they were the same type of men. The type of men that you might not like, but have to respect! A type of almost divine, god-like men.

No matter what kind of art, be it sword, chess, or music, to really be able to reach the very pinnacle of the skill, one has to be that type of men. Because that is the nature of art, because it demands one's entire life as sacrifice.

"But you have changed!" Lu Xiao Feng objected. "I had thought you were some half-crazy half-inspired god, but now you have some humanity in you."

"Maybe I really did change. If so then it's very likely that I won't be able to match Ye Gu Cheng, if he was not injured." Xi Men Chui Xue's demeanor turned even more somber. "But now he doesn't even have the slightest change of beating me. This isn't fair."

"So you plan to...."

"I plan to go to him."

"To do what?"

"Do you really think that I only know how to kill?" Xi Men Chui Xue coldly laughed.

Lu Xiao Feng's eyes lit up. He suddenly remembered that Xi Men Chui Xue seemed to have been hit by the Tang Family Poison Sand in the past. But he was obviously still alive and well right now.

"I'll take you." Lu Xiao Feng leapt to his feat. "If there was only one man who can cure Ye Gu Cheng's wound, it's you!"

The quiet suburbs, the cold moon. The moon was already full. The cold moonlight shone down upon the dark and sinister yard. The light was already lit inside the meditation room.

"The Master of White Cloud Castle would stay here?"

"He's like you, he doesn't want people to find him either!"

"So how did you find him?"

"The monk that lives here used to go by the name of Sheng Tong."

"He led you here?"

"I've done some good things too, I've saved a couple of lives." Lu Xiao Feng smiled. "You never know when a guy would pay you back for saving his life."

This might not be the most enjoyable aspects of saving a life, but it was at least one enjoyable aspect of it.

"Brother Ye, it's me." He knocked on the door. "Lu Xiao Feng."

No answer. Even if Ye Gu Cheng was asleep, he would never be this deep in his sleep. Could the room be empty? Lu Xiao Feng frowned. Xi Men Chui Xue was already breaking in through the door. There was a man in the room, a dead man! A man who was choked to death!

It was not Ye Gu Cheng.: "This is Sheng Tong."

"Who killed him? Why would he kill him?"

"Looks like he owed something to more than just me." Lu Xiao Feng

shook his head. "He led someone else here, but Ye Gu Cheng had already left. That person thought he had leaked their movements on purpose, so he killed him out of frustration!"

Not only did this explanation seem logical, it was probably the only possible explanation.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed again.

"This is the second person I've seen choked to death!"

"Who was the first?"

"First Madame Gong Sun."

"Did they die in the same hands?"

"Very possible."

Although Sheng Tong was not choked to death by a red silk sash, the method with which it was carried out looked very similar.

"What does First Madame Gong Sun have to do with this matter?"

"She should," Lu Xiao Feng let out a little exasperated laugh. "But I haven't figured out just how yet. I haven't found a thread!"

"What thread?"

"A thread that connects everything together."

"What else do you know?"

"Ye Gu Cheng was injured because someone ambushed him, or else Tang Tian Yi would have never had the chance to strike."

"Who ambushed him?"

"Someone who can charm snakes with a bamboo flute."

"The poison that Ou Yang Qing suffered was snake poison as well."

"Not only did this person injure Ye Gu Cheng and Ou Yang Qing, he also killed Big Shot Sun, Sheng Tong, and First Madame Gong Sun!"

"Are you sure?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"Because I have already confirmed that the one who choked First Madame Gong Sun to death was none other than that snake charmer. He had planned to distract me and place the blame on First Madame Gong Sun."

"There doesn't seem to be any connection at all between those 5 people."

"And that's why I can't figure out why someone would want to get rid of them!"

"Have you found any suspicious persons yet?"

"Only one person has been acting suspicious."

"Who?"

"Honest Monk!"

Honest Monk would ambush and kill people? Who would believe that?

"I know nobody will believe me, but he really has been the most suspicious person!"

"When did you start getting suspicious of him?"

"Since that one sentence."

"Which sentence?"

"Ou Yang Qing is a virgin."

"What does Ou Yang Qing's virginity have to do with Honest Monk?"

"It does."

Xi Men Chui Xue did not understand, nobody would.

"When I was dealing with that Princess Dan Feng matter, I went looking for Big Shot Sun. That day Big Shot Sun just happened to be at the same brothel as Ou Yang Qing. And on the way there I just happened to run into Honest Monk as well."

Xi Men Chui Xue still could not figure out where this was going.

"So I asked him, where did come from? Where was he going?"

"What did he say?"

"He said he was coming from Ou Yang Qing's bed!"

"But Ou Yang Qing is a virgin."

"Based on that, you can see that Honest Monk wasn't completely honest."

"That doesn't mean he killed!"

"Everybody lies for a reason, what was his reason?"

"So you think he must have done something unspeakable the night before so he had to give you some lie as an alibi?"

"Of course, he could not have expected that I would get to know Ou Yang Qing!"

"Why wouldn't he use just anybody else? Why did he use Ou Yang Qing?"

"Because Ou Yang Qing was in the same business as him!"

Xi Men Chui Xue was stumped again.

"After I brought down the Green Shirt Pavilion, I discovered that there was another secret society in the martial world called 'Red Shoes'. Also, they seemed to be controlling Green Shirt Pavilion behind the scenes."

"I heard about that."

Lu Xiao Feng was a legendary character, after all. His bringing down of Green Shirt Pavilion, subjugation of Huo Xiu, capture of the Embroidery Bandit, and entrapment of Jin Jiu Ling with First Madame Gong Sun to induce out his confession have spread throughout the entire martial world long ago.

"Only after I found out about Red Shoes did I finally realize that they

were also being controlled behind the scenes as well!"

"Controlling them behind the scenes is another secret society?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"Green Shirt Pavilion was a society of men, Red Shoes consisted entirely of women, this other secret society could very well be made up entirely of monks and might be called White Socks!"

"And you think that the head of this organization is none other than Honest Monk?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded again.

"Very rarely do I ever run into him, yet when I was dealing with Green Shirt Pavilion, he suddenly appeared. Then when I was searching for Red Shoes, he showed up again. That's just too much of a coincidence."

"But he didn't stop you from bringing down Green Shirt Pavilion, nor did he prevent you from finding Red Shoes!"

"Because he knew very well that I was committed by then. Even if he had tried, he would not have stopped me."

Even Xi Men Chui Xue had to concede that it was almost impossible for anyone to prevent Lu Xiao Feng from doing what he wanted.

Lu Xiao Feng let out a cold chuckle and continued: "Monks all wear white socks. He said that the socks he's wearing are actually meat socks, I pointed out that his meat socks are still white, he claimed that his skin isn't white."

"His skin isn't white!"

"If there were some mud on your white socks, are they still white socks?" Lu Xiao Feng sneered.

"Yes," Xi Men Chui Xue had to concede the point. "So you suspect that he wanted to kill First Madame Gong Sun and Ou Yang Qing to shut them up?"

"Because not only do I know them, I've become their friends. So he was afraid that they might let leak his secret."

"That night, Big Shot Sun was at that brothel as well."

"Besides, Big Shot Sun really knew way too much."

If a man really knew too much, his hope for a long life will probably go unfulfilled.

Xi Men Chui Xue pondered for a while before concluding: "No matter what, all of this is merely your own deduction. You have no evidence."

"My deductions are very rarely wrong!"

"So that's how you've found a single strand, a thread, to connect together Big Shot Sun, Ou Yang Qing, and First Madame Gong Sun."

"Yes."

"What about Ye Gu Cheng? Why would Honest Monk go after Ye Gu Cheng?"

"Because he wanted to use this opportunity to expand his power to the Capital."

Xi Men Chui Xue was stumped again.

"He knew Li Yan Bei and Du Tong Xuan had placed heavy bets down on you two because both men wanted to use this opportunity to expand their territory as well."

"Li Yan Bei betted on me?"

"So that's why he tried to buy out Li Yan Bei first."

"Using that banknote?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"It was a monk who bought him out, Gu Qing Feng."

"Because he thinks Ye Gu Cheng will surely lose, so all there's left for Du Tong Xuan to do is lose?"

"This way he'll be able to wipe out the two big powers inside the capital city in one fell swoop, and with a minimum amount of effort as well."

"Such a complicated plan, only you two could dream up something like this." Xi Men Chui Xue sighed.

"I didn't come up with it, he did!"

"But you are the one who deduced it," Xi Men Chui Xue coldly countered. "Doesn't that make you better than him?"

"You don't think my deductions are right?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you must think that, I can tell." A rather exasperated smile appeared on Lu Xiao Feng's face. Suddenly, he sighed and added. "Besides, that's what I think as well!"

"You don't think these deductions aren't exactly logical either?"

"That's why I said I still haven't found that thread!"

"Didn't you already find one?"

"Not good enough."

Of course, they were not having this chat standing in that room.

Nobody likes to stay in a dark and damp room with a corpse any longer than they have to. The cold breeze of the suburbs, on the other hand, seemed to clear one's mind, making it even sharper. They were slowly strolling along a small path, underneath the September moon. The Autumn wind gently rustled the yellow grass on the side of the path, the world seemed quiet and lonely. They had already walked quite a distance.

"This thread still can't explain everything," Lu Xiao Feng suddenly spoke up again. "There's still one more unexplained death."

"Who?"

"Zhang Ying Feng."

Xi Men Chui Xue knew of him. "Three Valiants and Four Beauties" were all from one sect. That means that Yan Ren Ying's elder martial brother was none other than Sun Xiu Qing's elder martial brother. Now that Sun Xiu Qing was Madame Xi Men, Xi Men Chui Xue would have to deal with this Zhang Ying Feng matter.

"He died?"

"He died yesterday." Then Lu Xiao Feng felt compelled to re-iterate his original point. "A very strange death."

"Who killed him?"

"Should be you."

"Should be me?" Xi Men Chui Xue frowned. "I should have killed him?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"Because the purpose of his arrival here in the city is none other than revenge!"

"So that's my reason for killing him?" Xi Men Chui Xue coldly replied.

"The fatal wound was on his throat, there was just one single drop of blood."

Of course, Xi Men Chui Xue understood what this meant.

Only an incredibly sharp, extraordinarily frightening, and amazingly fast strike could make such a wound. And it was just one single, solitary blow! Other than Xi Men Chui Xue, who else would have such a quick strike?

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Too bad I know now that you weren't his killer!"

"Do you already know who is?"

"There are two main suspects, a eunuch and a pockface."

"To die at the hands of two people like that is quite an accomplishment." Xi Men Chui Xue was not without a sense of humour.

"Too bad Zhang Ying Feng could not have died in their hands." Lu Xiao Feng was laughing at this whole predicament again. "First of all, I still can't find a motive as to why they would want to kill Zhang Ying Feng. Second of all, they could not possibly be able to match up against Zhang Ying Feng."

"So the two people that should be the killers could not possibly be the killers!"

"So my head hurts."

"Who is the killer?"

"That's what I want to know as well. I can't help but suspect Zhang Ying Feng's death is somehow connected with this as well!"

"Why?"

"Because you can count eunuch as monks as well. And they also wear white socks."

Xi Men Chui Xue silently pondered the situation.

"Yan Ren Ying is the one who recovered Zhang Ying Feng's body?" He suddenly asked.

"Yes."

"Where is he now?"

"You want to see him?"

"I want to see that fatal wound on Zhang Ying Feng's throat, maybe I'd be able to figure out whose sword it came from!"

"I have already inspected the wound, inspected it very closely."

"I know your martial arts skill isn't bad, your eyes and expertise isn't shabby either." Xi Men Chui Xue coldly refuted. "But when it comes to the sword, your knowledge isn't much better than that of an old maid!"

All that was left for Lu Xiao Feng to do was to let out a little laugh at himself. He had no ground to argue. Nobody could argue anything to do with swords with Xi Men Chui Xue.

"If you insist on going, I'll take you there." He continued, the tired smile still on his face. "But you better be careful."

"Why?"

"Because Yan Ren Ying has already found a helpers, among them were not only 2 lamas from Tibet, but also two mysterious swordsmen who trained for many years from some mysterious sword sect a top Mt. Water of Goddess."

"Do they wield swords?"

No matter how mysterious a sword sect might be, in the end, they would still be wielding swords.

"As long as they wield sword, they should be careful when they run into me!" Xi Men Chui Xue coldly commented.

"So the ones who should be careful is them, not you." Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"Of course."

"What about those two lamas?"

"The lamas are yours."

Buddhist and Taoist monks were already giving Lu Xiao Feng a headache, now the lamas were his as well.

"Some seek fame, some power, others seek fortune, you know what I seek?" He mumbled.

"Trouble."

"Absolutely. No matter where I go and where I look, all I find is trouble!"

"So where are you going to go look next?"

"All Fortune Inn."

All Fortune Inn was located on the main street on the eastern part of the city. Supposedly, it was the oldest and biggest hotel in the capital. By the time they arrived, it was already deep into the night, but Yan Ren Ying and company were not there.

"Master Yan wanted to bury his martial brother," the hotel clerk explained. "He left not so long ago with two lama masters!"

"Where were they headed?"

"Altar of Heavenly Cacoons."

Altar of Heavenly Cacoons was located outside of the Gate of Lasting Peace.

"Why are they taking him there?"

"Because the altar has already fell out of use, so the lamas use it as a crematorium."

"Cremation?"

"Traditionally, the farmers and shepards of the outter regions have always been cremated by lamas when they die. Although some of them have moved into the heartland, they've kept that tradition, going so far as importing special grass from the outter regions."

"Is there something special about these grass?"

"Yes, not only are they especially soft, they stay green even after they have dried."

"What do they do with this grass?"

"They pad the boxes with them!"

"What boxes?"

"Sort of like coffins, except it's just until the cremation."

"Why?"

"Because lamas charge a fee, if the fee isn't paid in full, then you have to wait. I've seen it once, the entire hall would be filled with these half-meter wide, one meter high boxes."

"The boxes are only half a meter wide, one meter high?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded, looking like he was about to puke.

"So they dead can't lie down or stand up but have to be squatting in the box."

Even Xi Men Chui Xue frowned.

"Not only will the main hall be filled with these boxes, yellow cloth sacks will be hanging from the ceiling."

"What's in the sacks?"

"Ashes of the dead. They only ship the ashes back to their homeland once a year. So before they are shipped out, they hang them on the ceiling of the main hall."

"We can't allow them to put Zhang Ying Feng into one of those sacks."

"So we better hurry."

Chapter 7 - Rescue at the Crematorium

Deeper into the night. The light in the hall was dim, contributing to make the hall look even more like the inside of a tomb. The September night air was suppose to be cool and refreshing, but in here, it carried with it an unspeakable stench.

The stench at eunuch headquarters was enough to make a man puke, but this stench was different. This stench was strange and terrifying. Because this was the stench of rotten flesh. Some boxes had blood on them, a dark and crimson shade of blood that slowly leaked out from the in between the pieces of wood.

"Bang!" Suddenly, one piece of wood snapped as a crack appeared on it. It almost seemed like there was somebody alive in the box, struggling to get out. Could the dead really be revived? Even Xi Men Chui Xue felt his back go cold.

"Don't worry," Lu Xiao Feng patted him on the shoulder and forced a brave smile onto his face. "The dead can't come back to life."

Xi Men Chui Xue chuckled at that remark.

"But the dead will rot, and they will become bloated, bloated to the point of bursting out of the box!"

"Nobody asked you for an explanation." Xi Men Chui Xue coldly dismissed him.

"I was worried that you might be frightened."

"I'm only frightened of one kind of men!"

"What kind?"

"The kind that won't shut up."

Lu Xiao Feng laughed, though it was not a very joyous laugh. Nobody could get very joyous at a place like this.

"Strange, none of them are here." Lu Xiao Feng mumbled as he paced back and forth among the boxes.

He much rather be cursed by others for not shutting up than to actually shut up. At a place like this, one would go crazy before long if one did not talk. Not only would talking help him relax, it also lets him temporarily forget about this frightening stench.

"Maybe they are in the back cremating Zhang Ying Feng's body, the only oven in this place is right behind the hall."

"The only oven?"

"There's only one oven here, and it doesn't produce smoke."

"You know quite alot."

"There is one thing he doesn't know." Someone mocked from behind the hall. "That oven can cremate up to 4 people at once. It'll burn all 4 of you to ash."

Strange voice, strange accent, strange men!

Lamas were not all odd or strange, but these two lamas were not only distorted, but grotesque as well. Nobody could describe their face, for they looked like two demonic masks made from a green tinted copper.

They were dressed in yellow robes, but the robe only covered half of their upper body as their left shoulders were left bare. On their left arm were 9 green copper rings that matched the one that hung around their ears. The weapons in their hands were green tinted copper rings as well. Other than where they gripped the rings, the rings were shapened to form an edge. Anybody, upon seeing two men like this at a place like this, would be covered in cold sweat out of fear. Instead, Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"Turns out lamas can't count," he joked. "There's only two of us here, not four."

"Two in the front, plus two more in the back." One of the lamas suddenly broke into a hideous smile, bringing his sinister teeth into view. The other lama's face, however, was frozen like a corpse's face.

"Who are the two in the back?" Lu Xiao Feng did not quite understand

him.

"Two people waiting to accompany you two to the Western Paradise."

Lu Xiao Feng laughed again.

"I don't want to go there, I don't have any friends there."

"Kill!" The unsmiling lama abruptly ordered. The copper rings shook as the two lamas prepared to pounce.

"Both of them are lamas." Xi Men Chui Xue coldly observed.

"There's only two of them."

"The lamas are yours."

"So what are you going to do?"

Xi Men Chui Xue chuckled. Suddenly, he drew his sword. With a flash, the sword flew towards a wooden box to the side. Nobody could imagine the speed with which he unsheathed his sword and struck, nor could anybody expect him to attack the box, his sword did not kill dead men.

"Bang!" At that exactly instant, another box suddenly cracked as a snake-like sword came flying out, aimed directly at Lu Xiao Feng's groin. This strike was truly too fast and too devious, nevermind that it was

completely unexpected.

The dead can still kill? If Lu Xiao Feng was not Lu Xiao Feng, he would have already died by this sword! But Lu Xiao Feng was Lu Xiao Feng. He suddenly reached out and, with his index and middle fingers, caught the blade!

It did not matter if the strike was from a man or a ghost, as long as he tries, he will always catch that sword, be it a human sword or a demonic sword.

This was indeed a singular skill in the world and never failed.

"Tzz!" And it was at this same exact instant when Xi Men Chui Xue's sword penetrated into the box. Suddenly, a blood curdling howl screamed out from within the box as pieces of wood exploded and a person leapt out.

A dark and skinny man with a dark sword in his hand. His face was covered with blood, bright red blood.

"Turns out there's four of them as well!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Four of them, 7 eyes." Xi Men Chui Xue coldly commented.

The left eye of the man dressed in black who jumped out from inside the box had, amazingly, been pried out by the tip of the sword. Like a mad man, he swung the black snake like sword of his as he, with the speed of lightning, made 9 strikes. His techniques were odd yet effective,

strange yet vicious. Pity he was using a sword. Pity he ran into Xi Men Chui Xue!

"I wasn't planning to kill." Xi Men Chui Xue coldly stated.

His sword flashed once again, and only once! The man in black's howls suddenly abated as his entire body suddenly froze as he stood there like a mannequin. The blood was still gushing out, but he collapsed like a punctured balloon.

Blade pinched between his fingers, LU Xiao Feng looked down at the box in front of him. Incredibly, there was not the slightest movement or noise coming from the box.

"This definitely isn't a lama inside this box." He suddenly concluded.

"Mm."

"I caught a sword for you, how about you catch a lama for me and we'll call it even?"

"Deal." Xi Men Chui Xue suddenly took off as the flashes of his sword rained down upon that smiling lama like a lightning storm. He did not like the look on the lama's face when he smiled.

The lama's rings began to spin and encircle himself. His moves were also odd yet effective, strange yet vicious. Twin rings were a rather strange pair of weapons to begin with anyways, if any kind of sword or sabre gets ensnared within its circles, it would be at least taken away, if

not completely broken.

The flash of the sword flickered as it entered within the circles of the twin rings like a moth throwing itself into the flame. The hideous smile appeared on the lama's face again as he suddenly twisted the twin rings as he tried to break that sword of Xi Men Chui Xue's in half!

"Break!" That word did not make it out of his throat, because just as he was about to open his mouth and speak, he suddenly discovered that the blade had already arrived in front of his throat. Such an icy cold blade! He could almost actually feel its coldness as it seemed to slowly enter his blood. Then he did not feel anything anymore, nor did he smile anymore. Xi Men Chui Xue did not like the look on his face when he smiled.

Even though the unsmiling lama's face was already deathily pale, he still gritted his teeth and was about to pounce.

But Xi Men Chui Xue just pointed at Lu Xiao Feng instead.

"You are his." He slowly brought up his hand and gently blew off the singular drop of blood on the edge of his blade and did not even look at this lama anymore. The lama took a step back in surprise and saw that drop of blood fell onto the ground. Finally, he stomped his feet on the ground and threw himself at Lu Xiao Feng.

Lu Xiao Feng still had the sword that came from the box pinched between his fingers. An ironic smile appeared on his face

"This guy really doesn't like to be put at a disadvantage for anything...."

"Ding!" The sound cut him off. The 9 rings on the lama's left arm suddenly all came twirling towards him at great speed. The lama himself also left at great speed.

As soon as the copper rings left his hand, he threw himself through a window and ran away. Xi Men Chui Xue had already put his sword back into its sheath and was standing there, watching unperturbed, with his hands behind his back, as if all of this had absolutely nothing to do with him.

"Ding! Ding! Ding!" Another series of ringing, like pearls landing on a jade plate, could be heard as, with several gentle flicks of his finger, Lu Xiao Feng knocked all of the copper rings out of the air.

This kind of rings was actually a very dangerous and hard to handle type of projectile, but to him, they seemed to have turned into some child's toy.

"Ever thought of selling that finger of yours?" Xi Men Chui Xue suddenly asked.

"That depends on what you plan to buy it with."

"Sometimes I'm almost willing to trade one of my fingers for it."

Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"I know your sword skills are decent and are pretty quick to strike. But one of your fingers would, at best, be worth about one of my toes." He jested.

The box was still completely quiet and still. This sword could not have just thrust itself out. Where was the guy?

Lu Xiao Feng knocked on the box.

"Do you plan on hiding in there for the rest of your life?"

No answer was forthcoming.

"If you don't come out, we are going to be forced to tear down your house."

Still, no answer.

"This guy probably still haven't figured out that as long as I said it, I'd always be willing to go through it." Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

He lifted his hand up and slapped it down. The box split open. The man was still in the box, squatting in the box, not moving one bit. Tears, drool, and his noses were all running freely, not to mention there was a stench on his body. He was literally scared to death.

This startled Lu Xiao Feng. Mt. Water of Goddess, mysterious sword sect, all these names sounded somewhat scary, but who would expect that he

would not be able to take a scare?

"This man did not come from Mt. Water of Goddess." Xi Men Chui Xue suddenly declared.

"How do you know?"

"I recognize their sword techniques."

"What are they?"

"That move is Sea South Sword Sect's Cyclone."

"They are the disciples of the Southern Seas Sword Sect?"

"Without a doubt."

"Why would they masquerade as swordsmen from Mt. Water of Goddess?"

"That's a question you should ask him."

"Pity that he doesn't seem to be able to talk anymore."

"Don't forget there were still two people in the back."

Who were these two people in the back? A dead man and a live one!

Of course, the dead man could not move, but the live man could not move either. The dead one was Zhang Ying Feng, the live one was Yan Ren Ying. This proud and defiant young man, was currently lying on the ground like a dead man, as if they were next in line waiting to be cremated.

Lu Xiao Feng recognized that he merely had his pressure point sealed and helped him sit up. With a quick flick of his hand, Xi Men Chui Xue unsealed his pressure points and glared with an icy stare.

He also noticed Xi Men Chui Xue's pale and icy face as he tried to stand up.

"Who are you?"

"Xi Men Chui Xue."

A gnarl appeared on Yan Ren Ying's face as he fell down again.

"Kill me!" He sighed.

Xi Men Chui Xue coldly laughed.

"Why didn't you kill me?" Yan Ren Ying demanded through gritted teeth. "Why did you save me instead?"

"Because he never wanted to kill you." Li Xiao Feng sighed as well. "It's you who wanted to kill him."

Yan Ren Ying lowered his head, looking as if he would rather be dead instead of feeling what he was feeling.

"The way they sealed his pressure points are also that of the Southern Seas Sect." Xi Men Chui Xue suddenly said.

"They were his invited helpers, why would they turn on him?" Lu Xiao Feng frowned.

"That's a question you should ask him yourself!" Xi Men Chui Xue coldly responded.

"They aren't invited." Lu Xiao Feng did not ask before Yan Ren Ying answered. Gritting his teeth, he explained. "They came looking for me."

"The volunteered to help you get your revenge?"

Yan Ren Ying nodded.

"They said they were friends of my master."

"And you believed them?"

Once again, Yan Ren Ying's head lowered in shame. He was truly too

young, still unfamiliar and susceptible to all the lies and traps that the martial world had to offer.

All Lu Xiao Feng could do was put up a sympathetic smile.

"Do you know why they wanted to get rid of you?"

Yan Ren Ying paused.

"They attacked me as soon as we got here. But I did seem to hear them say one thing."

"What?"

"It's not us that killed you, it's the 3 wax figurines that killed you." That was what they said as Yan Ren Ying collapsed.

"What wax figurines?"

"The ones that my martial brother molded."

"Between the 7 of us, he was always the smartest, and he had a pair of truly skillful hands." He went on to explain. "Once he sees your face, he could very quickly mold a figurine of you in his sleeves that looks just like you."

"Could he a relative of 'Clay Man Zhang' in the Capital?"

"The capital city was his home town. He is very familiar with the people on the ground."

--That explained how he knew Sixth Brother Ma.

"When we parted way, he did not have any figurines on him. But when I was inspecting his body, 3 figurines fell out of his shirt."

"Where are those figurines now?" Lu Xiao Feng immediately inquired.

"Right here with me. But I don't recognize any of the 3 people."

But Lu Xiao Feng did; at least, he recognized two of them. He pretty much recognized them the moment he laid eyes on them.

"This is Manager Wang and Sixth Brother Ma."

Zhang Ying Feng's skill was truly incredible, but it was a shame that the third wax figuring had already been smushed flat.

"He must have molded these 3 figurines just before he died, because he knew these 3 men were going to kill him."

"You think that these 3 men are his real killers?" Xi Men Chui Xue wondered.

"Without a doubt."

"So just before he died, he was still thinking of ways to let his martial brother avenge him and molded the faces of his true killers?"

"That's right."

"But at such a crucial life or death moment, where did he go to find wax?"

"He didn't have to." Yan Ren Ying answered this question. "He would always carry a slab of wax with him. Whenever he has nothing to do, he would around play with the wax."

"Looks like that clever pair of hands of his didn't come about naturally, but was trained." Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

In reality, not only was hard training required, but it had to be coupled with a fiery and irrepressible passion that other people could not fathom. It is like that with anything, any skill. If your goal is perfection, then you have to have a kind of fiery passion towards it. The same type of passion that Xi Men Chui Xue had toward swords.

A touched look seemed to have appeared on Xi Men Chui Xue's face, because he understood this passion. Nobody knew and understood this passion as clearly as he did. During his youth, no matter where he went, he had his sword with him at all times, even when he took baths or fell asleep.

"Zhang Ying Feng had Sixth Brother Ma to take him to that eunuch nest looking for you!" Lu Xiao Feng observed.

"But instead he stumbled upon Manager Wang and Sixth Brother Ma's secret!" Xi Men Chui Xue deduced.

"So they killed him."

"Manager Wang and Sixth Brother Ma might be utterly useless, but this third person was a master."

"He knew before hand that he was no match against this guy and that he was doomed to die. So he secretly molded these figurines so as to let others know who his killers are!"

Because he had concluded that others would never suspect this third man to be the real murderer. If so, that means the secret the 3 men were discussing must have been a truly Earth shattering secret.

"The buildings there are small and narrow, and it's always crowded." Lu Xiao Feng continued. "They couldn't find anywhere to hide the body nor could they figure out a way to destroy the body."

"So they threw the body on the back of a horse and shipped him out." Xi Men Chui Xue concluded.

"They had planned to place the blame on you, to put you up against the E'Mei Sect. Two birds with one stone."

Although the truth was revealed, they still did not know the most important piece of information -- the third figurine had been flattened.

Xi Men Chui Xue closely inspected the flattened figurine.

"No matter what, this man cannot be Honest Monk!"

This man had hair. Not only could Zhang Ying Feng make a likeness, he could go as far as replicating one's hair.

"He seems to be very fat."

"No, his face is flattened, that's why it looks so fat."

"He has a beard, but not too long."

"So he isn't very old."

"His face looks green."

"That's the color of the wax, not of his face."

"So now we know he's a bearded man, not too fat, not too thin." Lu Xiao Feng sighed and another weary smile appeared on his face.

There were tens of thousands of men who fit that description in the city, where do they start looking?

The fire in the oven was already lit. The lamas seemed to have planned to cremate Yan Ren Ying and Zhang Ying Feng together for a long time.

"They were probably all under Manager Wang's command and came here to kill Yan Ren Ying to shut him up. So they probably didn't expect us get here!"

"Or maybe they weren't ordered here by Manager Wang, maybe that 'third guy' is the real mastermind behind all of this."

"Doesn't matter, lamas are monks too, they also wear white socks."

"There are quite a number of Taoist monks within the Southern Seas Sect."

The fire flickered and shoned onto Zhang Ying Feng's face, shoned onto that fatal wound on his neck as well.

"Can you tell who made that strike?"

"No. But there are people other than me who are capable of such a strike!"

"Other than you, how many?"

"Not many, not more than 5 who are alive."

"Which five?"

"Ye Gu Cheng, the Wooden Taoist, and 2 or 3 more swordsmen you wouldn't know about even if I told you their names. One of them is a hermit living on Mt. Water of Goddess."

"You know him?"

"Even if I didn't know him," Xi Men Chui Xue sneered, "I know his sword."

"How about Hunan Swordsman Wei Zi Yun?"

"His techniques aren't steady or quick enough," Xi Men Chui Xue shook his head, "and forget Yin Xian."

Lu Xiao Feng mulled it over for a bit.

"Maybe there are some whose sword skills might be high, but very rarely wield a sword."

"That might not be likely, but it's still not impossible."

"If Honest Monk would use a sword, I'm sure he would be amazing. I've always felt that his level of understanding mastery of martial arts was

immeasurably deep and broad.”

“Honest Monk doesn’t have any hair, or a beard.”

Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

“There are such things as fake men, nevermind fake beards.” He seemed dead set on Honest Monk.

Yan Ren Ying had been standing off to the side in awe all this while; abruptly, he walked closer and bowed to Xi Men Chui Xue.

“No need to thank me, the one who saved you isn’t me, it’s Lu Xiao Feng.” Xi Men Chui Xue briskly told him.

“I’m not thanking you, the debt I owe you for saving my life could not possibly be encompassed by a mere thanks.” A weird look appeared on his face, in the flickering light of the fire, it was hard to discern whether he wanted to laugh or cry.

“I would like to humbly ask you to take that bow back to my younger martial sister.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve misunderstood her this entire time. I looked down on her. I thought she shouldn’t be together with the nemesis of our sect.” Yan Ren Ying hesitated before finally summoning up enough courage to continue.

"But now I finally understand, vengeance isn't nearly as important as I had thought...."

--Vengeance is not something that had to be delivered. There are far too many emotions and feelings that are much more intense and noble than hate. He did not say those words, because he could not bring himself to say it. But he finally understood in his heart. Because at this very moment, the hatred in his heart could not possibly compare to the intensity of the gratitude. He suddenly bent down, picked up his martial brother's body, and began to walk away with his head held high. The distance was covered in darkness, but the brightness of light was approaching.

Lu Xiao Feng watched him leave before finally sighing: "He still is a young man, every time I see a young man like him, I can't help but feel that this world isn't too bad. It's not bad to be alive."

How precious is life? Life will always be filled with hope. Xi Men Chui Xue's eyes were flickering with that warmth once again. This was not the reflection of the flickering flames his eyes, but the reflection of the molten glacier in his heart.

Lu Xiao Feng looked at him and suddenly patted him on the shoulder.

"You finally saved a life today, how does it feel?"

"Better than taking a life!"

Under the flickering fire, "the third man"'s face looked contorted and grotesque. Nobody would look very nice with their face flattened.

"Now that Sixth Brother Ma died, there's only one person who knows his identity!"

"Manager Wang?"

"Mm."

"Do you want to go find him?"

"No." Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "He's probably deep within the Forbidden City by now, I won't be able to find him even if I tried."

"And even if you did find him, he would never reveal the secret."

Lu Xiao Feng intently stared at the figurine in his hand, his eyes seemingly lit up again.

"There is still another way for me to find out who he is."

"What way?"

"I can go find Clay Man Zhang, I'm sure he'd know of a way to restore this figurine back to its original state."

Xi Men Chui Xue looked into his eyes with a hint of smile.

"You really are quite smart."

"I was never stupid." Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"Are you going now?"

Lu Xiao Feng shook his head, a gentle and soft warmth appeared in his eyes as well.

"Right now I just want to see one person...."

He did not say that person's name, but Xi Men Chui Xue already knew who that person was.

The stars slowly dispersed, the boundless and winding night was finally over. The brightness of light was approaching.

Chapter 8 - Initial Skirmishes

The 15th of September, morning. Lu Xiao Feng came walking out from a door in the back corner of the yard behind the bakery, turned out of the yard, and strode along the morning fog covered street. Although he did not sleep the night before, he was not tired. After a cold bath, he felt ever more awake and energetic, his entire body even more ready to face the day.

He had already made a promise to himself that he would get to the bottom of this conspiracy and find the mastermind behind it all. The wax figurine was still in the pocket inside his shirt. He swore to flatten this man's face like the face on this figurine.

"Clay Man Zhang lives on the Goldfish Alley behind Cherry Street. The front door is lacquered black and has a business sign in the front, very easy to find."

He had already seen Ou Yang Qing. Even though she did not say anything, the colour on her face had changed to a much healthier shade, she had obviously made it through the danger zone.

--Not only did Xi Men Chui Xue have a killer sword strike, he also have life saving antitodes.

"Saving lives really does seem to be more enjoyable than taking lives."

Lu Xiao Feng was smiling. He could only hope that a man who killed

could turn into a man who saved others' lives.

He had also seen Sun Xiu Qing. The talkative and frank Sun Xiu Qing of yesterday had also changed, changed into a gentle and patient woman. Because no longer was she the female swordsman that was slashing her way through the martial world, she was a soon to be mother.

"You two forgot to invite me to your toast, you better not forget to invite me for the red eggs!"

"When are you going to invite us to drink your toast?"

Lu Xiao Feng saw the warmth and gentleness in Ou Yang Qing's eyes and was asking himself on the inside: "Is it really about time I start my own family?"

Of course, it was still too early. But if there was such a thought in a man's heart, the day when it finally comes true could not be far off.

Leaves do not fall far from the root, people will always eventually settle down. Besides, he really have wandered for far too long. The life of an unattached bachelor might contain quite alot of good times, but the emptiness and loneliness after the good times is not something that many people could bear.

And also something very few people would understand. Those long sleepless nights, that loneliness after the music has stopped and the people have left, those tears and regret after waking up from a drunken night.... How does that really feel? Only in their hearts do they really know

the truth.

Clay Man Zhang was an old man. He seemed to have already forgotten that he ever had such a prodigal son like Zhang Ying Feng.

In the minds of the elders, all those youths who would go out and wander the world instead of settling down and devoting themselves in the family business are prodigal sons.

Of course, Lu Xiao Feng did not bring up Zhang Ying Feng's death. Age, in and of itself, is a kind of sadness. He did not want to add another layer of sadness to this old man's life. But as soon as the subject of his expertise came up, this hunched over old man almost seemed to have straightened up and the gleam his eyes flickered in pride.

"Of course I can restore this wax figurine to its original form. It doesn't matter what it was like before, I can make it exactly as it was before." The old man proudly declared. "You've come to the right place young man."

"How much time do you need?" Lu Xiao Feng's eyes lit up as well.

"Two hours at most." The old man was very sure of himself. "Come back and pick this up in two hours."

"Can't I just wait here?"

"No." The old man showed his authority within the field. "I don't let other people watch me work."

This was his rule. When doing this, his word was the law, because Lu Xiao Feng could not do what he could. So Lu Xiao Feng had to leave.

Besides, two hours with nothing to do would be perfect for going to get some tea at the tea house on the street ahead.

House of Heavenly Peace was a large tea house. It opened for business right at the crack of dawn, and it was full of customers the moment it opened. Because the tea houses in the capital was not as simple as the tea houses in other places, nor were their costumers there to simply drink tea.

Especially in the morning, most of the people here were actually waiting to either be dispatched or be contracted. The masons, the carpenters, the caterers, the tailors, and all kinds of other craftsmen and merchants would come around tea houses on the morning of the day after winning a big contract or job to find workers. If they show up late, they might end up with unskilled workers.

The inside of the tea house might look chaotic, but in reality every profession has its own little territory within it. The carpenters would never sit with the masons, because sitting at the wrong place meant no jobs.

There were called "pits". Every profession had several tables that made up of its own "pit" and there was no mistaking it. This was not the first time Lu Xiao Feng had visited the capital, and he was fully aware of these rules. So he picked out a seat by the door and poured himself a cup of "Eight-Hundred-a-Bag" tea.

The tea here was not sold according to weight, instead, it was sold by bags. One flask of tea, one bag of tea leaves. There were "Two-Hundred-a-Bag", "Four-Hundred-a-Bag", and the best, "Eight-Hundred-a-Bag". Eight hundred actually meant eight taels of silver a bag.

Of course, the upper crust of the Capital liked to sound more impressive than anywhere else, and of course, eight taels did not nearly have the same ring to it as eight hundred. Lu Xiao Feng took two sips out of his cup and was just getting ready to call over the waiter to order some sesame roasted peanuts when two people sat down at the table facing him.

Sharing a table in a tea house was pretty common. But the expression on the two men's face were very strange, the look in their eyes was even stranger. Between the two of them, all four of their eyes were unblinkingly staring at his face.

They were dressed in fine clothes, there was a bright gleam in their eyes, and their temples were bulged out. Obviously, they were both martial art masters.

One of them was relatively older, he was extremely big and tall with an intimidating presence, and even though he was not carrying any weapons on him, he had a pair of vein covered hands with huge, protruding knuckles that looked like they could crush rocks. The younger one was dressed in even fancier cloth, he looked, literally, high browed and seemed to have even more of an aura than the older man. Those bright eyes of his were totally blood shot, as if he had not slept the entire night, as if they were filled with hate and anger.

They were staring at Lu Xiao Feng, but Lu Xiao Feng just simply would

not even look at them.

The two of them shot at look at each other. The older man suddenly took out a little wooden box and placed it on the table.

"Sir, are you Lu Xiao Feng?"

Lu Xiao Feng had to nod, and involuntarily persed his lips a little. Those two mustache of his that he liked to keep sure have brought an untold amount of unwanted trouble.

"I am Bu Ju."

"Hello." Lu Xiao Feng replied without showing the slightest expression, as if he had never heard of this name before. In reality, of course he had.

There were probably not that many people in the world that had not heard of this name. "Heaven Splitting Palm" Bu Ju's name controlled the land from Sichuan to Hunan. He was the Master Helmsman of over 36 different clans of pirates and bandits in that area! The corner of Bu Ju's eyes flinched.

Normally, whenever the corner of his eyes flinch, it meant he was about to kill. But this time he had to endure it.

"Have you heard of me, sir?" He suppressed his indignation.

"No."

"Well then you should have heard what's in this box." Bu Ju mocked.

He opened the box. Inside was three huge, shiny, polished, completely flawless jade rings. Lu Xiao Feng was someone who knew what was what. He easily discerned that each of these 3 jade rings were priceless treasures.

Yet he shook his head again.

"Never seen these things before in my life."

"I know you never seem them, not many have truly laid eyes on this kind of treasure." Bu Ju coldly retorted before suddenly pushing the box to Lu Xiao Feng's side of the table. "But if you do me one favor, they are all yours!"

"What favor?" Lu Xiao Feng pretended not to know.

"These three jade rings in exchange for three of those belts."

"What belts?"

"No point in playing games, is it a deal or not?" Bu Ju coldy answered, cutting to the chase.

Lu Xiao Feng smiled. He had figured out what they were after the moment they sat down.

--"We've already instructed people to start spreading this information to our friends in the martial world!" "Those without that belt on their bodies, with absolute no regard as to who they are, will be executed on the spot if caught trespassing within the Forbidden Palace!"

He knew it was trouble the moment he heard those two sentences.

"Yes or no?" Bu Ju viciously demanded, he was slowly losing his temper.

"No!" His answer was simple and direct. He was not the type who was scared of trouble.

Bu Ju almost jumped to his feet as his knuckles cracked like falling rocks, the expression on his face was not friendly anymore either. But he did not make a move, because that young man grabbed a hold of him with one hand and took out another object with his other hand and placed it on the table. It was a poisonous prickly vine. None other than the Tang family's world famous Poison Vine, its poison would literally seal up a man's throat the moment it touched any of his blood.

In the sunlight, it was obvious that not only was this Poison Vine made of the purest steel, it was very intricately designed, on every single leaf was hidden 7 fine steel needles. Upon impact, the needles would fly out so it did not matter if the vine struck bone or flesh, the person was doomed to death.

These kind of weapons were not usually placed on tables to be seen by others, and very few men could inspect it in such detail. Even Lu Xiao Feng had to concede to himself that this weapon had with it an

incomprehensible power. Even lying there on the table, he could still feel it.

"My surname is Tang." The young man abruptly broke the silence.

"Tang Tian Zong?"

"Yes!" The young man proudly affirmed. He really should be proud of himself. His skill was the best among the brothers and disciples of the Tang family despite being the youngest.

"Are you planning to exchange your projectile here for my satin belt?"

"The weapon is dead, if you don't know how to use it, I can give you the entire sack of projectiles and it would still be completely useless!" Tang Tian Zong coldly commented.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Turns out you are just planning on letting me see it."

"Not many people get to lay their eyes on this kind of a projectile."

"Well I can also take out those satin belts for you to see, not many people get to lay their eyes on those either!"

"Pity they can't be used to kill."

"Well that depends on whose hands they are in doesn't it? In the right hands, even a rice straw can kill."

Tang Tian Zong's expression darkened as he glared into Lu Xiao Feng's eyes. Suddenly, he pressed down using the hand that was laying on the table and the Poison Vine immediately bounced into the air.

"Chi!" With only a hiss, the projectile traveled shot up more than 6 meters.

"Dong!" He nailed itself onto one of the beams on the ceiling. Not just onto the ceiling, but all the way buried within the wood. Not only was this young man's weapons ingeniously designed, his hand skills were shocking as well. But Lu Xiao Feng seemed to not have noticed at all.

The look on Tang Tian Zong's face became even more sinister.

"That is a real weapon capable of killing."

"Oh!"

Three jade rings plus a life, do you agree to the exchange?"

"Whose life?"

"Yours."

Lu Xiao Feng smiled again.

"If I refuse, you'll take my life?"

A smirk appeared on Tang Tian Zong's face when Lu Xiao Feng asked that question. Slowly, Lu Xiao Feng took two more sips from his cup before he suddenly realized a very crucial point. If Tang Tian Zong and Bu Ju could find him, then others must have been able to keep track of his activities as well.

If Clay Man Zhang could really restore that figurine to its original form, then there would surely be people who would want to kill him and take care of that loose end. Lu Xiao Feng put down his cup of tea, he had decided to stop playing games with these two men. This was his last bit of evidence, Clay Man Zhang could not die.

"Have you made up your mind?" Tang Tian Zong demanded.

Lu Xiao Feng let out a little laugh as he slowly stood up, picked up the 3 jade rings from the table, and put them in his pocket.

"You are agreeing to the trade?" Bu Ju broke out in a smile.

"No."

Bu Ju's smile immediately changed to a frown.

"Then why did you take my jade rings?"

"I chatted and kept you two company for a while, so I should get something in return." Lu Xiao Feng casually explained. "My time has always been very precious."

Once again, Bu Ju jumped to his feet. This time Tang Tian Zong did not pull him back down, for both of his hands were already inside the leopard skin pouches at his side.

But Lu Xiao Feng did not seem to notice any of this.

"If you really want the satin belts, there is still a way, but I have just one condition." He said with a smile.

"What condition?" Bu Ju demanded, barely able to contain his anger.

"That each of you would get on your knees right now and kowtow to me three times."

With a furious howl, Bu Ju attacked. Tang Tian Zong's hand shot out as well.

"Crash!" A flask suddenly appeared in Bu Ju's hand as he crushed the flask to smithereens, spilling its content all over the purple satin robe he was wearing. Amazingly, he did not see how the flask got into his hand.

He had wanted to grab a hold of Lu Xiao Feng's shoulder, but somehow

he grabbed this tea flask instead. Tang Tian Zong had one hand out of his pouch with a projectile in hand, but, for some inexplicable reason, he held on to it.

Lu Xiao Feng was already across the street, jovially waving to them.

"You broke the flask, so you pay. I'll let you guys pick up the bill as well. Thank you very much."

Bu Ju was just about to give chase when he suddenly noticed some hissing sounds coming from Tang Tian Zong's mouth. His face was pale as sheet, but then quickly turned to a sickly green before changing again to blood red as cold sweat came rolling down his forehead. His pressure points had been sealed. When did Lu Xiao Feng make his move? Bu Ju's steely face suddenly turned ghostly pale as he let out a long sigh and fell back into his chair.

"I told you, if you wanted Lu Xiao Feng to listen to you, you have to make your move first." Suddenly, from outside the door, came a laugh. "As long as he can still make his move, you are going to have to listen to him."

A person strolled in as he spoke, his head was bald and when he smiled he looked like a statue of Buddha: "I'm honest, I always tell the truth. Do you believe me now?"

Lu Xiao Feng did not see Honest Monk. If he did he would be even more anxious. But though he did not see Honest Monk, he was feel as if he was about to die from apprehension. Not only was he filled with anxiety, he was filled with regret as well.

He should not have left Clay Man Zhang there by himself. He should have at least sit there and guarded the door. Pity that if Lu Xiao Feng could sit down and drink a cup of tea, he would never stand outside and wait for others.

Right now he could only hope that "third man" has not found Clay Man Zhang. He even went so far as to swear that if Clay Man Zhang was still alive and could give the wax figurine back to him, he would swear off all kinds of tea for the next 3 months, no matter how good the tea might be.

Clay Man Zhang was alive, and from the looks of him much happier than he had been before. Because the wax figurine has been restored, that meant he was about to get paid. As one gets older, he would have less and less chance to spend his money, yet his interest in earning money would increase and increase.

Earning and spending money always seemed to be inversely proportional to each other, a rather odd coincidence don't you think? Only after he entered and saw Clay Man Zhang did Lu Xiao Feng finally sighed in relief. Amazingly, he did not forget to remind himself.

--No tea for the next 3 months, no matter how good the tea might be. Tea could be addicting too. Those who liked to drink would find it very difficult to not be able to drink tea. Luckily for him he did not forget to remind himself one more thing: he could still drink wine, lots of wine.

Clay Man Zhang held out both hands, the figurine in one hand, nothing in the other. Lu Xiao Feng understood exactly what he meant.

Those with real skill always wanted to get paid as soon as they accomplished what they have been asked to do, or else they would be very unhappy even if you are late for just one bit. In reality, the fact that he did not ask Lu Xiao Feng to pay beforehand was already quite remarkable. Only when the empty hand was filled with banknotes did Clay Man Zhang relax his grip on the wax figurine in the other hand. Only then did a smile appear on his face. But Lu Xiao Feng found it impossible to smile. The face on this wax figurine was none other than Xi Men Chui Xue's face.

Goldfish Alley was a very quiet and peaceful alley. The September sun shining down on one's back felt neither too cold nor too hot. To be able to walk down an alley like this on a day like this was supposed to be a pretty enjoyable thing.

But Lu Xiao Feng did not feel any joy in his heart. He absolutely did not believe Xi Men Chui Xue killed Zhang Ying Feng, nor did he believe Xi Men Chui Xue would work with those eunuchs. Most importantly, he did not believe Xi Men Chui Xue would tell a lie, nevermind tell him a lie. Yet this wax figurine's face just had to be that of Xi Men Chui Xue's.

"Did you make a mistake?" He had wanted to ask Clay Man Zhang, but did not.

He had always been respectful of others skills and position. In this area, Clay Man Zhang had unquestioned authority. If he had implied that Clay Man Zhang had made a mistake, it would have been more insulting than a real slap to his cheek.

Lu Xiao Feng never liked to make others feel miserable, yet at this moment he was feeling miserable. This figurine had been his most

promising lead, yet now that he got his lead, he was even more confused than he was before. How did this happen? He could not figure it out.

The not too cold and not too hot sunlight bathed down on his face, and also the face of the wax figurine in his hand. Staring at the figurine, he continued to walk. However, as soon as he walked out of the alley and onto the street, he suddenly, and literally, jumped in place, immediately turned around, and ran back as if someone had whipped him from behind. What did he just discover?

Where Clay Man Zhang meet his costumers was also where he worked. Windows covered three sides of the room. There was a huge table with all manners of pottery, dirt, paint, carving knives, and brushes. Other than making wax figures, he was also in the business of carving out maps and painting some good luck charms that scare away demons.

The third time Lu Xiao Feng entered here, the old man was bent over the table carving. He did not even lift his head up upon this unexpected entrance.

Even with all the windows, it was still somewhat dark in the room. The old man's eye sight, of course, was not what it once was, his face was almost touching the table.

Lu Xiao Feng cleared his throat a couple of times, no reaction from the old man. He cleared his throat some more, louder this time. Still no reaction. Not even the slightest movement, not even the knife in his hand. How could he carve the map without moving the knife?

Could someone have gotten to this old man? Lu Xiao Feng's heart sank,

but he actually jumped as he scrambled up behind Clay Man Zhang and was just about to pull him up to see what was going on.

"It's windy outside, go close the door!" The old man suddenly ordered.

Lu Xiao Feng's heart skipped another beat with that start as he back up and, laughing at his own silliness, gently closed the door. He felt positively like a paranoid old maid.

"What do you want?"

"I'm here to exchange this wax figurine!"

"Exchange what wax figurine?"

"The one you just gave me is the wrong one, so I want the one I gave you back!"

It was only when he walked out of the alley did he realize that this wax figurine that Clay Man Zhang just gave him was a shade yellow while the one that Yan Ren Ying gave him was light green. They had obviously been switched by this old man to frame Xi Men Chui Xue as the killer once again. If this old man was not one of them, he had at least been bought out.

"I had asked you to restore the wax figurine to its original form, not to mold another one for me altogether."

Slowly, he approached the old man again, not taking his eyes off of the knife in his hand. A knife used for carving maps could be used to kill as well, he did not want to be treated like the map and have someone carve out a couple of ridges on his throat.

Surprisingly, Clay Man Zhang put the knife in his hand down before he slowly turned around.

"What are you talking about? I don't understand."

Neither did Lu Xiao Feng, for he saw this old man's face. This Clay Man Zhang was not the same Clay Man Zhang he had just met.

He almost swallowed his tongue. It took him a while to regain his breath and then he looked the old man over several more times.

"You are Clay Man Zhang?" He finally got around to asking.

The old man cracked a yellow toothed smile.

"There are real and fake Pockmark Wang barbers, but there is only one real Clay Man Zhang, no other shops!"

"Then who was that before?"

Clay Man Zhang squinted his eyes and looked around the room.

"Who are you talking about? I just came back, there wasn't even a shadow here."

Lu Xiao Feng felt as if somebody had stuffed a whole mouthful of rotting peaches down his throat.

So the Clay Man Zhang he met before was a fake. It seemed easier to trick him than to steal candy from a baby.

Clay Man Zhang looked down at the wax figurine in his hand.

"But I did mold this figurine, how did you get your hand on it?" He suddenly said.

"Have you seen this man before?" Lu Xiao Feng immediately followed up.

"No."

"How did you make his likeness without ever meeting him before?"

Clay Man Zhang smiled.

"I have never met Guan Yu either, but I can make a likeness of him too!"

"Did someone bring you a painting of him and asked him to mold his likeness for him?"

"Finally you seem to be getting it."

"Who asked you to make this?"

"This guy." He turned around and picked a clay figurine from the table. "When he came, I just happened to have a piece of clay in my hand, so I just kind of naturally made one of him as well. But I forgot to give it to him."

Lu Xiao Feng's eyes lit up. But the old man's hand just happened to have grabbed the figurine by the head, so he could not see what he most wanted to see, that face. Clay Man Zhang sighed and shook his head.

"When you get old your mind just doesn't work that well anymore, if you don't forget this one thing you forget that other thing." He mumbled.

"Maybe your mind doesn't work that well anymore, but your luck is still working great." Lu Xiao Feng suddenly joked.

"What luck?"

"If you hadn't forgotten to give him this figurine, you wouldn't have made an extra 500 taels of silver."

Clay Man Zhang's eyes lit up as well: "You are willing to pay me 500 taels of silver?"

“As long as you give me that clay figurine, these 500 taels will be yours!”

Clay Man Zhang could hardly contain himself as he immediately brought the clay figurine right up to Lu Xiao Feng’s face. Lu Xiao Feng was just about to reach out and grab it when “bang!”, the figurine’s head burst open as seven or eight tiny, icy, shooting stars streaked toward his throat. Inside this clay figurine was hidden a spring action trap and it had been set off not even half a meter away from Lu Xiao Feng’s throat!

Not even half a meter, incredible, lightning-like speed, an attack that nobody could have expected, and seven poison needles that would kill a man as soon as it touches his blood.

Looks like this time Lu Xiao Feng is doomed! Anybody would be doomed under these circumstances! This kind of distance, this kind of speed, this kind of weapon, nothing up in the Heavens or in the depth of Hell would be able to dodge this attack.

This ambush had clearly been meticulously planned out to the smallest details, not only should it work, it almost could not not work!

Not even Lu Xiao Feng could have dodged this attack. But he did not die, because there was still a wax figurine in his hand. When the springs sprang into action with that “bang,” his hand flicked and the wax figurine jumped off of his hand and perfectly met the seven needles.

Even after impacting on the figurine, the force of the poison needles had not completely dissipated and the figurine still hit Lu Xiao Feng’s throat. Even though the wax figurine could not kill, it still startled him. In that moment of confusion, Clay Man Zhang had already took off and

jumped through one of the windows. By the time Lu Xiao Feng realized what was going on, he was already outside.

This "Clay Man Zhang's" reaction was quite quick as well, as soon as he saw his ambush failed, he bailed.

But as soon as he flew out of the window, there came a series of yelp followed by a loud and rather dull "thud", as if something heavy just collided with some piece of wood.

After the thud, the yelp stopped. By the time Lu Xiao Feng made his way out of the room, he was already lying on the ground in the middle of the yard, seemingly having fainted. Another man was standing beside his body and holding his head between his arms, it was a bald head.

"Honest Monk!" Lu Xiao Feng nearly yelled.

Tenderly holding his head, Honest Monk tried to put up a brave smile.

"Looks like I should change my name, change it to Unlucky Monk."

"When did you become unlucky?"

"If I'm not unlucky, then why would people smash their head into my head for no reason?"

By now, a huge and black colored bruise was visible on "Clay Man Zhang's" head. Lu Xiao Feng did not know whether he should be

laughing or puzzled. He knew better than anyone that there was no way the two heads collided by accident, nor could he figure out why Honest Monk would want to help him out.

"Luckily I have a pretty hard head." Honest Monk mumbled as he gingerly continued to rub his head.

"That's why you might be unlucky, but Clay Man Zhang here has much worse luck." Lu Xiao Feng joked.

"Are you saying he is Clay Man Zhang?"

"He isn't?"

"If he is Clay Man Zhang, then I am Lu Xiao Feng."

Of course Lu Xiao Feng knew this Clay Man Zhang was not the real one, yet he could not understand why the first, real Clay Man Zhang would want to switch the wax figurines to fool him.

"I might not be pretty, but I've come here and asked Clay Man Zhang make a likeness of me as well."

"So you knew Clay Man Zhang?"

Honest Monk nodded.

"Did you come here to get Clay Man Zhang to make a likeness of yourself too?"

"Don't know if he'll be able to get my four eye brows right." Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"Even if you had 8 eye brows, he would get them all exactly right, down to every single strand of hair. Shame that all he can do is wait for others to mold a likeness of him now!"

"Why?" Lu Xiao Feng frowned.

"I came around the back, there's a well in the back."

"What's in the well?"

Honest Monk sighed.

"It's probably best for you to take a look yourself!"

Of course there was water in the well. But in this well, besides water, also had blood. Clay Man Zhang's blood!

"I wandered over here because I caught a whiff of the smell of blood coming from this well." With a frown on his face, Honest Monk put his hands together and bowed. "Twas better to not have seen than to have seen. Amida Buddha, Merciful Buddha."

What he saw was four dead people, and now Lu Xiao Feng has seen them too. All four members of Clay Man Zhang's family was dead at the bottom of the well.

Lu Xiao Feng did not speak or even open his mouth, he did not want to puke in front of Honest Monk. His entire stomach was turning.

Only now did he realize that the two Clay Man Zhang's he had met today were both fakes. The first one was solely responsible for switching the figurine and framing Xi Men Chui Xue. And in case Lu Xiao Feng did not fall for that trick, he would have surely returned with the second fake waiting here to take his life!

Such a venomous and devious trap, if one trap failed then there was another trap within that one waiting to be sprung. Lu Xiao Feng suddenly sighed. He suddenly realized that his luck was pretty good, he had survived until now.

Honest Monk sighed along with him.

"I told you a long time ago, you are just entirely engulfed in this aura of bad luck and will surely run into bad luck!"

"What kind of bad luck did I run into now?"

"What were you doing? You were coming to ask a dead man to mold a likeness of yourself. How is that not bad luck?"

Lu Xiao Feng gazed back at Honest Monk.

“Even if I came here to ask a dead man to mold a likeness of myself, what are you doing here?”

That question seemed to have stumped Honest Monk. Luckily for him, at this exact moment, that “Clay Man Zhang” with a bruise on his head suddenly let out a groan. When they came around back, they did not leave laying there and brought him with them.

“Looks like he’s about to wake up,” Honest Monk sighed in relief. “Thank goodness I didn’t headbutt him to death!”

“Were you planning to headbutt him to death?” Lu Xiao Feng stared at him.

Honest Monk immediately brought his hands together again in prayer: “Amida Buddha, wrong, wrong. The Heavens favours life, if I have such designs, would I not be thrown down into the 18th level of Hell?”

Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

“It’s not that bad there, would at least run into a couple of old buddies. Besides, if you don’t enter Hell, then who shall enter Hell?”

{Note: Lu Xiao Feng’s phrase “if you don’t enter Hell, the who shall enter Hell?” is a paraphrasing of a well known Buddhist scripture which reads: “If I don’t enter Hell, then who shall enter Hell?” meant to urge all true believers to take on all hardships, necessary and unnecessary, to better the lives of those whom they touch.}

Honest Monk shook his head furiously and began to mumble to himself: "Must remember to never argue with this man. Must remember to never argue with this man. Must remember..."

"Are you reciting some scripture?" Lu Xiao Feng could not help but crack a smile.

"I'm just merely reminding myself so I won't have to enter argument Hell in the future." Honest Monk sighed.

Lu Xiao Feng had something to say, but held it back. He noticed that the man on the ground had finally regained his consciousness and was struggling to sit up while gingerly holding his head. Lu Xiao Feng looked down at him, and when he noticed Lu Xiao Feng too, his eyes were immediately filled with the look of fear. When he noticed Honest Monk, he appeared to be even more shocked. He seemed to recognize this monk.

But there was no expression on Honest Monk's face, nor did Lu Xiao Feng even open his mouth. The two of them silently stood over him, staring down at him. He might not have been the real Clay Man Zhang, but he was really an old man. Lu Xiao Feng knew there was no need for him to speak, he should know what this situation implies.

The old man sighed: "I know you must have questions to ask of me, and what you want to ask of me."

Of course, he should know. Anybody, after being ambushed, would want to inquire as to where his attacker came from and who planned the

ambush. A man was more than 50 years old, how could he not know?

"But whatever you ask, there is one sentence I can't say, because once I do, I will die for sure."

"You are scared of death?" Lu Xiao Feng asked.

"I might be an old man, I might know that I won't live much longer, but I'm more afraid of death now than I was as a young man!" He said with a strained smile. That was the truth. The older one becomes, the less one wants to die. That is why the ones who are foolishly brave with no regards for their own lives are all young, that is why all those who leaps off buildings are also all young -- when was the last time you saw an old man commit suicide?

"If you are so frightened of death, aren't you afraid that we will kill you?" Lu Xiao Feng asked with a blank face.

"No, I'm not!"

"Why not?" Lu Xiao Feng was puzzled.

"Because from your appearance, I can tell you don't like to kill, and you don't look like you are planning to kill me either."

"You can tell?"

"I've lived to this age, if I can't tell that, then what have been spending

my life doing?" He actually started laughing, laughing like an old fox.

"You are wrong!" Lu Xiao Feng shot him a vicious look and abruptly cut off his laugh.

"Oh?"

"You weren't wrong about me, I won't kill you. But you are wrong about the man who sent you here. You didn't kill me, so it doesn't matter if you told me the secret or not, he will kill you."

The smile on the old man's face froze as fear reappeared in his eyes.

"I'm sure you know how he operates, if you want to leave, I won't stop you. But I won't care if you die or not either!"

The old man got up to his feet, but he did not move from that spot.

"I've never killed that many, but I've saved quite a few!" Lu Xiao Feng continued.

"You... you are willing to save me?"

"You are willing to spill the secret?"

The old man hesitated, not able to make up his mind just yet.

"Take your time and think about it, I..."

He suddenly stopped talking, almost stopped breathing. He suddenly noticed that the whites of the old man's eyes had turned to a deathly green color. But within those deathly green eyes was a solitary drop of blood, ready to ooze out. By the time he ran to the old man's side, the corner of his eyes had already cracked open, yet he did not seem to feel any pain at all.

Lu Xiao Feng grabbed his hand, it was cold as ice. Lu Xiao Feng was shocked.

"Quickly, just tell me his name!"

The old man's lips moved slightly as a strange and unsettling smile appeared on his face. The smile had just appeared moments before it was frozen. His entire body had turned stiff and all of his skin had already dried to the point of resembling cow hide. Lu Xiao Feng reached out and touched him.

"Boom!" His skin resonated like a drum.

"Wooden Mummy Powder!" Honest Monk almost yelled, he was shocked too.

Lu Xiao Feng lightly sighed.

"Poison in blood, man to mummy."

"Could he have been poisoned the entire time and only now did the poison take effect?"

"If you hadn't knocked him out, he might have turned into a mummy as soon as he flew out of the yard."

"So no matter if the trap worked or not, he was doomed from the get go."

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Such an elaborate plan, so many lives lost, all for what?"

"For killing you!"

A disbelieving look appeared on Lu Xiao Feng's face: "If it was all for killing me, the price they were willing to pay may have been way too much!"

"And you may be under estimating your own worth quite a bit!"

"They want to kill me only because they are afraid that I might get in their way!"

"You think they have some other goal?"

"Mm."

"What would that goal be?"

"With the heavy price they have been willing to pay so far, it must be something huge!"

"But what could it be?"

"Why don't you go ask your Bodhisattva of Compassion, the Goddess of Mercy?"

"Bodhisattvas will only listen to monks' prayers, and monks can't hear Bodhisattva's words."

"Then why did you become a monk?"

Honest Monk smiled.

"Because being a monk is better than being Lu Xiao Feng, Lu Xiao Feng has lots of worries and troubles, monks have very little!"

He suddenly began to loudly sing and clap: "You are troubled, I'm not troubled. How much trouble, all self induced. You want to go find more, then I am going to leave!"

The singing had not stopped, but he really did leave.

"How much trouble, all self induced."

Lu Xiao Feng watched his silhouette disappeared with a tired smile:
"Too bad for me that even if I stop looking for trouble, they start to come looking for me."

The sky was high, the weather was refreshing. Autumn had truly arrived in full force. Lu Xiao Feng walked out of the alley to find a man standing at the mouth waiting for him. His attire was fancy, but his face was pale. It was none other than the number one fighter within the Tang family, Tang Tian Zong.

Why would he be waiting here? Was trouble about to find Lu Xiao Feng once again?

Lu Xiao Feng cracked a smile: "Where's your friend? Did he pay for that flask of tea?"

Tang Tian Zong silently glared at him with those bloodshot eyes of his. Suddenly, he fell to his knees and kowtowed three times to Lu Xiao Feng, taking Lu Xiao Feng by absolute surprise.

--"That each of you would get on your knees right now and kowtow to me three times."

Lu Xiao Feng had proposed that condition himself, but he never expected Tang Tian Zong would go through with it.

A proud young man such as him would usually rather have his head chopped off than to kowtow down to someone, anyone.

But Tang Tian Zong nevertheless did, and not only were they real kowtows, they were pretty loud ones too.

This vain and cocky young man was willing to put himself through such humiliation, all for what?

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

“Must you go after Ye Gu Cheng? You might not get your revenge even if you do catch up to him!”

Tang Tian Zong stood back up and returned to silently staring at Lu Xiao Feng. He did not say one word or utter one sound.

All that was left for Lu Xiao Feng to do was to untie one of the satin belts from around his waist and hand it over. Tang Tian Zong took the belt in his hand, turned, and walked away.

Chapter 9 - Belt Troubles

September 15th, noon. The sunlight was resplendent as it shone down on the city. Lu Xiao Feng walked out of the Goldfish Alley and began walking down this ancient yet still bustling street. Despite the fact he did not sleep at all the night before, he still looked to be full of energy and spirit.

Men and women were wandering up and down the street as the big and small vendors on either side of the street were flourishing. Even though he had somehow gotten himself into more trouble than he could count, his heart was still filled with joy. Because he liked people.

He liked women, he liked children, he liked friends, he would always have a heart overflowing with warmth for all people. Most people liked him in return. The cloth on his back might be slightly dirty, but his eyes still had that gleam in them, he was still standing as tall and as proud as he ever did. Any woman from 14 up to 40, once they laid eyes on him, would surely secretly take a second look his way.

He had take off the belts he had tied around his waist and placed them on his shoulder. Of the 6 belts, he had already given out 2, one to Honest Monk, another to Tang Tian Zong.

Now he was only hoping to get rid of these 4 belts as soon as possible. The only question stopping him was that he had not figured out who to give these to yet. Up ahead was a little trained monkey show about to get started as children immediately crowded around it.

An old man with a headful of silver hair, supported by a cane, came slowly walking out from a pharmacy and was almost knocked over by two of the children trying to make it over to the monkey show.

Lu Xiao Feng immediately ran over and caught him, preventing him from falling over.

"How do you do sir?" He smiled.

The old man was bent over, trying to catch his breath. Suddenly, he turned his head towards Lu Xiao Feng, winked, stuck out his tongue, and made a face.

Lu Xiao Feng was flabbergasted. He had seen quite a few odd occurrences, but he had never had any old men make any faces at him.

When he finally took a good look at the old man's eyes, he almost screamed. Si Kong Zhai Xing! Turned out this old man was actually that peerless and matchless "King of Thieves" in disguise.

Although he managed to not scream, he put some force into his hand and gave his upper arm a nice little squeeze.

"You little a\$\$h01e, you've showed up as well?" He said in a low voice.

"Well, since even a big a\$\$h01e like you have showed up, why can't a little a\$\$h01e like me be here?"

Lu Xiao Feng put in a little more strength into his squeeze: "Are you planning to steal one of my satin belts?"

Si Kong Zhai Xing's face contorted in pain as he furiously shook his head.

"You aren't?"

"No, I really am not."

Seeing the look on his face, Lu Xiao Feng finally let go and smiled.

"Did you switch professions?"

"No!" Si Kong Zhai Xing answered as he sighed and rubbed his shoulder.

"If you haven't changed professions, then why aren't you going to steal?"

"I already have one, why would I still need to steal another one?"

"What do you already have?"

"A satin belt."

Lu Xiao Feng paused for a second.

"You already have a satin belt?"

"Yes."

"Where did you get it?"

Si Kong Zhai Xing smiled.

"I just took it off of a friend."

"And that friend would be me?"

Si Kong Zhai Xing sighed: "You know I don't have that many friends."

Lu Xiao Feng gnarled and reached out, trying to grab him again.

But Si Kong Zhai Xing was not about to let him grab him again as he ran far far away.

"Of the four satin belts on you, I only took one, that's already pretty big of me, aren't you satisfied?" He asked in between laughs.

Lu Xiao Feng glared at him, but then suddenly broke out into a laugh as well.

"I had assumed you were an intelligent guy, but it turns out you are an idiot!"

Si Kong Zhai Xing blinked, waiting for what he was going to say next.

"Have you asked yourself why would I just carry these satin belts so casually if they were the real satin belts?"

"Could this satin belt be fake?" Si Kong Zhai Xing almost yelled.

Lu Xiao Feng gave him a little wink, stuck out his tongue, and made a face to him in return.

Si Kong Zhai Xing stood there dumbfounded for a long time and then seemingly magically pulled the satin belt out from inside his sleeve.

"It really does look a little fake." He mumbled.

Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"I know you claim to never steal anything fake, but who would have expected that today would be the day you would be fooled."

"Please don't tell anybody about this, you'll destroy my reputation."

"You stole from me, and I can't even tell others about it?" Lu Xiao Feng mused.

"What if I give it back?"

"If you give it back, I'll still talk. The King of Thieves actually stole the wrong article! All those thief underlings of yours would probably laugh off all of their teeth when they hear about this!"

"What if I give the satin belt back to you and then take you out to a huge meal?"

Lu Xiao Feng hesitated and pretended to weigh his options.

"This could be worth considering, it'll depend on what kind of food you are going to get me."

"Fish fins braised in soy sauce, plus two big fat ducks, what do you say?"

{Note: Since they are in Beijing, the two ducks Si Kong Zhai Xing is referring to is, of course, Peking Ducks}

Lu Xiao Feng did not seem too convinced, finally, with much hesitation, he nodded. In reality, he was almost about to burst on the inside and roll around on the ground, dying in laughter.

--I have still fooled this little a\$\$hole. Seeing Si Kong Zhai Xing presenting satin belt back to him with such respect and decorum, he found it even harder to suppress his urge to laugh. Not only did he want

to just roll around in laughter, he felt like doing somersaults.

But then, unexpectedly, Si Kong Zhai Xing suddenly withdrew the satin belt.

"No, can't do!" He shook his head.

"What can't you do?" Lu Xiao Feng immediately asked.

"The ducks would be too fattening, and the fish fins would be way too greasy. If you eat too much you'll get diarrhea. We are old friends, I can't do that to an old friend!"

Lu Xiao Feng was dumbfounded once again.

Si Kong Zhai Xing blinked.

"Besides, I've just had an epiphany. Having a fake belt is still better than have no belt, wouldn't you say?" He also looked like he was trying very hard to resist bursting out in laughter before finally giving in as he did three somersaults and jumped up onto the roof of a building. Still laughing, he waved goodbye to Lu Xiao Feng and suddenly disappeared.

Lu Xiao Feng's belly almost exploded in anger.

"I swear, that little a\$\$h01e is my nemesis. I get nothing but bad luck every time I ran into him." He mumbled through clenched teeth.

He did not even finish before he suddenly realized that all those little children that had been watching the monkey show had surrounded him. Every single one of their eyes looking up at him, as if they all found him even more interesting than that little monkey show.

"Why aren't you guys watching the monkey over there?" Lu Xiao Feng could barely keep a straight face, realizing the irony of his remark.

One particular kid shook his head.

"The monkey isn't any fun, you are fun."

Lu Xiao Feng did not know if he should laugh or get angry.

"What's so fun about me?" He had to ask.

"You are friends with that gramps, so you definitely know how to fly as well."

Lu Xiao Feng finally figured it out, these kids were gathered around waiting to see him fly.

The kids all began shouting and begging: "Mister, can you fly for us? Please?"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed, but then suddenly let out a little laugh at his own genius.

"I'll teach you all a little song, and if you sing it for me, I'll fly for you guys ok?"

Every single one of the kids immediately clapped in excitement.

"Yes, we'll sing, we'll sing it every day from now on!"

Lu Xiao Feng immediately got down to teaching the kids the song:

"Si Kong Zhai Xing, is a monkey faerie.

Naughty faerie, is a rotten rascal.

Bad bad rascal, deserves a big spanking."

These kids were such good learners, they picked the song up right away and began singing it at the top of their lungs, singing non-stop.

The more Lu Xiao Feng listened to this song, the funnier he thought it was. Soon he was doubled over in laughter. Then, he also did three somersaults, landed on the roof of a building, and waved goodbye to the kids.

"If you sing this song whenever you can, I'll come back and fly for you guys whenever I can!" He said in between fits of laughter.

There really was one less belt from the 4 that was supposed to be on

his shoulder. Even Lu Xiao Feng had to concede that Si Kong Zhai Xing really was something else, that little monkey faerie was actually able to steal something away from Lu Xiao Feng right there in front of him.

First he felt like his belly would burst in anger, then almost burst in laughter, but now he only felt the emptiness inside his belly. He was starving. Lucky for him, it was lunch time. Enmanating from all of the restaurants, big or small, was a cacophany of cleavers and kitchen utensils as they prepared all manners of food. Even those who were not hungry would get hungry just from listening to them. If he does not get a big meal right now, this belly of his that almost exploded in anger and then almost burst in laughter would probably just implode out of hunger.

“Bring me a big dish of fish fins braised in soy sauce, a roasted duck, an entire kilogram worth of biscuits, and on top of that, give me one and half kilogram worth of Bamboo Green and 4 more dishes that goes down with wine.”

He went into the closest restaurant, grabbed the nearest table, order 8 or so dishes off the top of his head, and waited.

None of the eight or so dishes had arrived yet, but in strolled either or so people from the outside. The man in front was dressed in the finest silk and carried himself owned the place. Even though there was some slight hint of white in his sideburns, he was still dressed like a young bachelor. Around his waist was a jade belt that was studded huge crystals and some even bigger emeralds. That belt alone was priceless, but the sword tied to that belt was far more invaluable than the belt.

Following behind him was a group of seemingly insufferably arrogant young men, each one of them dressed fancier than the other and they all

seemed to got their eyes on top of their heads. But every single one of them moved with an agility and nimbleness that seemed to prove that they were all quick skilled in martial arts.

These men walked in, shot one look over at Lu Xiao Feng, and sat down as a group at the biggest table. Though they did not even bother looking anybody else, as if they were somehow unworthy of being noticed by them, they at least all shot Lu Xiao Feng a look.

Lu Xiao Feng could not be bothered to pay attention to them, but he did still recognize that sword that was tied to that jade belt.

A sword, sheathed in a black fish skin with a platinum mouth, was a very strangely shaped and unusually long sword. Along with the blood red tassel was two fish figurines carved out of pure white jade. Anybody who recognize this sword would also recognize the person with the sword.

This silk clothed middle aged man was, of course, none other than the master of Eternal Joy Mansion of Double Fish Pound of Tiger Mound from South of the Yangtze, "Peace and Tranquility Swordsman" Si Ma Zi Yi. "Nan Gong Gold, Ou Yang Silver, Si Ma Jade." That saying was referring specifically to the three biggest ancient and aristocratic families of the martial world.

Jade had always been the most precious among the three, so EnteralJoyMansion was, without a doubt, the richest and most extravagant of the them all. Besides the family martial arts that he inherited, Si Ma Zi Yi was the lone disciple of the "Mister Iron Sword" of yesteryears. He was a handsome young man that excelled in both the academic and the martial aspects of life, add that on top of his famous

family legacy, and the result was that he was reknowned throughout the world before he turned twenty. Even though he was now entering middle age, he still had his youthful arrogance and temper as well as his still handsome appearance.

To be able to see such a man in his full glory was supposed to be a very enjoyable occurrence, but Lu Xiao Feng would much rather lay his eyes on a dish of well cooked fish fins braised in soy sauce.

The fish fins were cooked just right, and the wine was just the right temperature. Lu Xiao Feng picked up his chopsticks and was just about to start eating when he noticed a young man dressed in purple with a pair of fish made of white jade hanging from his sword walking towards him.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed to himself. Trouble had found him once again. So he immediately, before the young man got too close, stuffed his mouth full of fish fins.

With his hand on his sword, the young man coldly sized Lu Xiao Feng up and down a couple of times before finally cupping his fist in a salute: "You, sir, must be Lu Xiao Feng."

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"I am Hu Qing, I'm from Suzhou, Tiger Mound, Double Fish Pound's Eternal Joy Mansion. Sitting over there is my Master. I think you, sir, knew that already."

Lu Xiao Feng nodded again.

"No point in beating about the bush, Master ordered me to come here to ask you to lend the belts on your shoulder and also invite you, sir, over for a drink."

This time Lu Xiao Feng did not nod, not did he shake his head, instead he merely pointed at his mouth. He had not swallowed that mouthful of fish fins yet, so there was no way for him to speak.

Hu Qing frowned. Even though it was obvious he was losing his patience, all he could do was to stand there and wait for Lu Xiao Feng to finish chewing.

"You, sir, can just give me the belts now if you want. If you, sir, want to keep one for yourself, that's ok too." He proposed as soon as he Lu Xiao Feng swallowed that mouthful of fish finsHe mad.

He made sound like it was nothing, as if the fact that he had opened his mouth was already giving Lu Xiao Feng a tremendous amount of face.

Lu Xiao Feng took his time swallowing the fish fins, then took some more time taking a sip of wine before letting out a little satisfied sigh. Then he flashed a smile at Hu Qing.

"I have long admired Master Si Ma's famed name and reputation, and I'm very thankful for Master Si Ma's good intentions and kindness. As for the belts...."

"What about the belts?"

"You can't borrow them." Lu Xiao Feng rather casually dismissed the offer.

Hu Qing's expression dropped as he immediately grabbed the sword. But Lu Xiao Feng did not even look at him as he picked up another fish fin and began to meticulously chew it over in his mouth, savouring its flavor.

Hu Qing was almost scowling at him as the blood vessels on the back of his hand were pulsing, as if he was just about to pull out his sword. Suddenly, someone let out a couple of coughs behind him.

"You should not have used that word: 'lend', nobody is willing to lend this kind of a thing."

Si Ma Zi Yi actually lowered himself to come over as well, but he still stopped quite a distance off, as if he was expecting Lu Xiao Feng to get up and greet him.

Lu Xiao Feng did not notice. He was obviously much more engrossed in the plate of fish fins in front of him than anything or anyone else.

So Si Ma Zi Yi had to walk over all by himself and, with that well groomed hand of his, pointed at the table. Hu Qing immediately took a banknote out and placed it down on the table.

Using that same well groomed hand of his, Si Ma Zi Yi stroked his equally well groomed beard: "Jade rings might be nice, but aren't nearly as useful as money. Bu Ju doesn't understand people, so of course he was

turned down.”

News really did travel fast in the Capital, even someone like him found out about that in just two hours.

“I believe you, sir, feel the same way about this.” Si Ma Zi Yi concluded.

Lu Xiao Feng nodded, conveying that, indeed, he did.

“This is a banknote worth fifty thousand taels that could be cashed immediately. With that amount of money, a normal person would be able to live the rest of his life without any worry.”

Lu Xiao Feng concurred with that as well.

“Fifty thousand taels of silver is more than enough for any two satins belts, any time, anywhere.”

Lu Xiao Feng completely agreed with that as well. A smile appeared on Si Ma Zi Yi’s face as he got ready to leave, as if the deal had just been sealed.

But it was Lu Xiao Feng who suddenly spoke up.

“Why aren’t you, sir, taking this banknote with you?”

“Take it where with me?”

"To a tailor shop."

Si Ma Zi Yi did not understand.

"There's quite a number of tailor shops out there. You, sir, can go make the deal with any of them, it would much simpler."

Si Ma Zi Yi's expression dropped as well.

"I want to trade this banknote for your belt."

Lu Xiao Feng laughed.

"This belt isn't available for trade."

Si Ma Zi Yi's seemingly always shining face had turned to a shade of green.

"Don't forget, this is fifty thousand taels of silver." He snapped.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"If you will let me eat this entire dish of fish fins in peace, I'll pay you fifty thousand taels!"

Si Ma Zi Yi's steely green face turned crimson. Someone sitting at the table to the side could not control himself and let out a little laugh.

As soon as the laughing started, there was a sword flash.

"Ping!" The tip of the sword had been caught by a pair of chopsticks.

The person who laughed was a half drunk merchant, the sword belonged to Hu Qing. With a mere flip of his wrist, the long sword around his waist flew out. But Lu Xiao Feng was even faster, as he suddenly, and casually, reached out with his chopsticks and caught the tip of the blade, like a snake charmer grabbed a snake. Hu Qing's face froze as he dumbfoundedly looked at Lu Xiao Feng.

"He's drunk." Lu Xiao Feng said.

Hu Qing bite down and tried to pull the sword out, but this sword seemed to have merged with the chopsticks.

"There isn't any rules against laughing here, this isn't EternalJoyMansion." Lu Xiao Feng casually observed.

Sweat appeared on Hu Qing's forehead.

"Bang!" Suddenly, another swordflash struck as the sword in his hand broke in half!

Si Ma Zi Yi's sword had left its sheath, but now it had returned there.

"Back off," He callously ordered. "From this day forth, you are forbidden from wielding a sword."

With his head held low in shame as he looked down at the broken sword in his hand, Hu Qing began to slowly back up. After 7 or 8 steps, tears suddenly appeared on his face.

"Shame, what a waste!" Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Waste?"

"Shame about this sword, shame about that young man too. His techniques aren't too bad, and this sword wasn't too bad either."

Si Ma Zi Yi's expression was still that dark as he coldly declared: "A sword that could be cut in half is not a good sword!"

"Maybe the only reason his sword was cut in half was because somebody was holding on to the tip of the blade."

"If the sword could be caught, there's no point in keeping it either."

Lu Xiao Feng shot him a look.

"So your sword would never be caught if you attacked with your sword?"

"Never."

Lu Xiao Feng smiled, suddenly smiled.

"My belt isn't available for borrowing, trading, nevermind selling!"

"Are you daring me to take it by force?" Si Ma Zi Yi mocked.

"Or we could bet for it."

"What kind of bet?"

"A bet on your sword."

Si Ma Zi Yi did not understand.

"If it's true nobody could catch your sword, then you win. And then not only can you walk away with my satin belt, you can come and take my head any time you want as well."

"I don't want your head."

"But you do want one of my satin belts."

Si Ma Zi Yi glared. "Other than that, is there no other way?"

"No."

Si Ma Zi Yi did not say anything for a long time.

"I'm going to aim for your left shoulder, get ready." He suddenly said.

With a smile, Lu Xiao Feng patted his left shoulder: "My shirt isn't too clean, I haven't washed it for two days. So you should probably pull out as quickly as you can so it doesn't get too dirty."

"As long as there's blood to wash with, it doesn't matter if blade gets dirty." Si Ma Zi Yi coldly humourlessly dismissed.

"I wonder if my blood is clean or not?"

"You are about to find out."

By the time the word "out" was heard, the sword was already out of its sheath. Like lightning, the flash of the sword fell towards Lu Xiao Feng's left shoulder. The sword was much longer than swords usually are, so it should be somewhat more difficult to unsheath quickly. But he utilized a special technique to pull out his sword so that once it was out of its sheath, it was already almost at Lu Xiao Feng's shoulder.

Lu Xiao Feng reached out and pinched his two fingers together! This was supposed to be a very simple move, but his precision and speed was something that nobody could imagine, nevermind describe.

This move might be simple, but he forged through countless trials to turn it into, literally, the cream of the crop. Si Ma Zi Yi could feel his heart sink, he could also feel his blood sink. His sword has been caught!

He started practicing with bamboo swords at the age of four. At 7, he began using real swords forged with pure steel. By now, he had studied sword for more than 40 years. Even just on the subject of how to unsheath a sword, he had studied more than 130 different types of maneuvers. At this point, he was capable of, in one motion, unsheath his sword and thread the tip of his blade through the loop hole in the middle of 12 free-falling bronze coins.

Yet now, his sword has been caught. In that instant, he almost could not believe this was true. He gawked at Lu Xiao Feng hand, having a hard time believing that it was a real hand made out of flesh and blood.

Lu Xiao Feng was looking at his own hand as well.

"You didn't use full force on that strike," He suddenly observed. "Looks like you really aren't after my head."

"You...."

Lu Xiao Feng cut him off with a smile.

"I'm not a good man, but you are not a bad one either. For not wanting my head, I'll give you a satin belt!"

He untied a belt and hung it at the tip of his sword before getting up and walking out without looking back even once. He was afraid he might change his mind if he did.

Even though he was not full, Lu Xiao Feng still felt good in his heart. Because he knew that, now, Si Ma Zi Yi most surely have come to understand two things. Anybody's sword could be caught, and the soft approach works much better than the hard approach on some people.

He believed that after learning those two things from this lesson, Si Ma Zi Yi would undoubtedly change that arrogant and intimidating air with which he carried himself.

But what was in all of this for him? He did not even think about that. Whatever he did, Lu Xiao Feng never thought for himself.

But his stomach was fiercely objecting. He might not have much of an appetite normally, but two mouthful of fish fins could not nearly be enough to satisfy it. To him, to be able to comfortably eat a quiet and full meal had turned into a nearly impossible proposition.

As long as he had these satin belts with him, no matter where he go, trouble would undoubtedly quickly come looking for him.

How should he give out these last two satin belts? Who should he give them to? He was prepared to give one of them to the Wooden Taoist, yet the Wooden Taoist was nowhere in sight. Those who should not show up all showed up, but of those who should, none did.

Because some people never show up when they are suppose to and always does when they are not suppose to. Lu Xiao Feng seemed to be always running into this kind of people, this kind of things. He sighed. Suddenly, he noticed Honest Monk walking up in the other direction, biting into a huge steamed bun in his hand. As soon as he saw Lu Xiao Feng, he reacted as if he had just saw a ghost and was immediately trying to find a way to get away.

But Lu Xiao Feng had already caught up to him and pulled him to a stop.

"Leaving so soon? Where are you going?"

Honest Monk rolled his eyes and replied: "I didn't bother you, I wasn't breaking any laws, why are you grabbing me?"

Lu Xiao Feng blinked, and then broke out into a smile.

"Because I want to make a deal with you."

"I don't want to make a deal with you, I don't want to get robbed."

"I guarantee you won't get robbed."

Honest Monk looked at him and hesitated.

"Let me hear what kind of deal you have in mind first."

"I'll trade you these two satin belts for that steamed bun in your hand."

"No deal."

"Why not?" Lu Xiao Feng yelled.

"Because I know there isn't this good of a deal in the world." He rolled his eyes again. "Bu Ju tried to trade you jade rings, you refused. Si Ma proposed fifty taels of silver, you refused. Now you want to trade it for my steamed bun, and you are not insane."

"Are you afraid that I'm laying down a trap for you?"

"I don't care if you are or aren't, I'm not going to fall for it."

"So you've made up your mind?"

"I have."

"No regrets?"

"No regrets."

"Alright, no deal. But when I want to talk, you can't stop me from talking."

Talking about what?" Honest Monk had to ask.

"Talk about this story about a monk who went to a brothel to visit a prostitute."

Honest Monk suddenly forced the steamed bun into Lu Xiao Feng's hand, grabbed the satin belts, and took off walking in the other direction.

"Don't forget, one of them is for the Wooden Taoist, you have to save one for him. Or else I'll still talk." Lu Xiao Feng shouted at his fading silhouette.

Honest Monk did not even bother to turn around as he disappeared faster than a whipped stallion. Lu Xiao Feng laughed. He did not remember his body ever feeling this light, as if he had never been this happy and relaxed in his life.

He had finally pushed those pieces of hot coal onto somebody else. It was as if a one ton weight off had been just lifted off of his back.

The steamed bun had not completely cooled off yet, biting into it, he could almost swear that this steamed bun was better than those fish fins.

He had been suspecting Honest Monk was the mastermind behind this entire conspiracy, but now he seemed to have forgotten it. Is he stupid? Or really smart?

The sun was slowly sliding towards the west. It was now two hours after Lu Xiao Feng handed those satin belts off to Honest Monk. Nobody knew what he had been up to in those two hours.

He seemed to have just walked around town several times. Even if there were some people following him, he had lost them by now. Of course, he could not risk leading anybody back to Delicious Fragrant Vegetarians.

He entered through the backdoor, there was nary a sound in the backyard. The air was filled with an ever changing mixture of fragrances of chrysanthemum and osmanthus. Even the little goldfishes in the pond underneath the pomegranate tree seemed to be too intoxicated to move.

Through the chrysanthemum brush, a person could be seen sitting inside the little gazebo. Seemingly entranced, sitting there on the rail.

The chrysanthemums were yellow, the rails were red, but her cloth was vivid green in color as it wrapped around her willowy frame. The signs of illness had not completely disappeared on her pale face but new troubles could already be discerned. She looked barely strong enough to hold up her cloth.

The colors of Autumn in this yard might be beautiful, but it could not compare to her beauty. It seemed that only now did Lu Xiao Feng realize just how beautiful Ou Yang Qing really was. Could it be because only now did he know that she has been secretly loving him?

The wind breezed by the bush of chrysanthemums by the rails. There were already several fallen leaves on the path. Quietly, he walked over. Suddenly, he noticed Ou Yang Qing's gleaming eyes were looking straight at him.

They did not meet too many times. In reality, they have not exchanged

more than 10 sentences in conversation.

But now there was indescribable feeling subtly tugging at Lu Xiao Feng's heart, causing it to beat faster. He seemed to be totally at a loss as to what to do.

What was she feeling in her heart? At least, Lu Xiao Feng was not able to discern anything different on her face. She was looking at him the same way she always looked at him. Either she was just a very calm person, or she was very good at playing games. And how many women are there in the world that are not very good at playing games?

Lu Xiao Feng sighed under his breath and walked into the gazebo.

"Are you feeling better?" He asked with a awkward smile.

Ou Yang Qing nodded and pointed to the stone stool opposite of her.

"Sit."

Lu Xiao Feng had planned on sitting down next to her, but if she was going to behave so coldly, he could not exactly act too warm either.

--Why do women enjoy playing games so much?"

Could it be because they all know this type of women was precisely what men likes? If Ou Yang Qing was truly nice and warm towards Lu Xiao Feng, he might have been scared away a long time ago.

So instead, he obediently sat down on that stone stool.

"Where is Xi Men Chui Xue?" There was a lot in his heart he wanted to say, yet he could even say any of them, so he had to settle for that filler.

"He's in the house with his wife, I figured they must have a lot to say to each other."

Lu Xiao Feng stood up, but then sat right back down. He had wanted to go in and talk to Xi Men Chui Xue, but he did not want Ou Yang Qing to think of him as unempathetic. The duel was looming, the outcome was still in doubt, this goodbye could very well be the very last one.

He really should let the two of them peacefully spend this entire afternoon together, let them say all those things that nobody else should hear.

The garden seemed to have engulfed them, the fragrance of flowers permeated throughout the air, the scene that surrounded them felt like a dream. Was there not just the two of them as well? Did they not also have very much to talk about?

Yet he could not, for the life of him, think of what to say! He seemed to have turned into a little boy going on his first date.

"Do you know him?" Ou Yang Qing suddenly broke the silence.

"Who?"

Ou Yang Qing pointed to her side, only then did Lu Xiao Feng notice the little wax figurine sitting on the rail. It was Manager Wang's figurine.

He could not understand why she would suddenly be so interested in the likeness of this eunuch: "Do you recognize him?"

"I've seen him before, he came to our place once."

"Our place" was, of course, the brothel she worked at.

Lu Xiao Feng was even more puzzled.

"Do you know that this man is a eunuch?" He could not help but ask.

"We have all kinds of clients at our place," Ou Yang Qing nonchalantly replied. "Not only eunuchs, but monks too."

She still seemed to remember what happened that day, still remembered that Lu Xiao Feng had wronged her. But Lu Xiao Feng seemed to have completely forgotten it, there were way too many much more important questions for him to ponder.

"He isn't the first eunuch to come to our place, and on that day, he didn't come alone!" Ou Yang Qing continued.

"Who else was with him?" Lu Xiao Feng immediately followed up.

"When he arrived, it was just him, but afterwards two swordsmen from the Southern Sea Sect showed up looking for him, as if they had prearranged a meeting."

"How do you know they are from the Southern Sea Sect?"

"I recognized their swords." The Southern Sea Sect's sword was not only particularly long and narrow, but had a distinct shape as well.

"I could also tell this old man was a eunuch. No matter how he disguises it, I could always tell."

"Big Shot Sun was there that day too?"

"Mm."

Lu Xiao Feng's eyes glowed. Manager Wang had undoubtedly arranged that meeting with those two swordsmen from the Southern Sea Sect at the brothel to discuss some secret plan.

When they found out that Ou Yang Qing and Big Shot Sun had arrived in the Capital, they feared either one of them would recognize them, so they went after the two of them to shut them up. First Madame Gong Sun's death undoubtedly had something to do with this as well. Those two Southern Sea Sect swordsmen would logically be the same two swordsmen that perished at the crematorium.

Lu Xiao Feng sighed deeply. He had finally found that thread. Now all he had to do was find the thread that could connect this thread with the other threads he had found, then he would be able to solve this case. Did he find several other threads just now? There was a lot one could accomplish in two hours.

"If any eunuch visits our place, I would always make sure to take him to my room!" Ou Yang Qing suddenly stated.

Why?"

"Because they are not men," she coldly explained. "The more useless the men are, the more liked to show off how manly they are. So even if I force them to sleep on the floor, they wouldn't dare complain and would actually pay extra. Because they are deathly afraid others find out about this weakness of theirs."

"That night, when Honest Monk spent the night in your room, did he sleep on the floor?" Lu Xiao Feng had to ask.

Ou Yang Qing nodded.

"Could he be a eunuch too?"

"He might not be a eunuch, but he isn't a man either."

Lu Xiao Feng let out another deep breath. Finally, he had found out why

Honest Monk lied to him. "Impotent" was a word that all men viewed as an unimaginable shame. That was why some men would rather be spending money to sleep on the floor of a woman's bedroom than to let other find out that he was "impotent."

Honest Monk was a man. Even monks could not avoid retaining that little bit of vanity.

Ou Yang Qing looked down at the little figurine: "That night, thi sold man didn't even have the nerve to touch me at all because he was so scared that I might find out he was a eunuch." She said with a mocking smile. "He could have never suspected that the only reason I let him stay was because I could tell he was a eunuch."

A strange look suddenly appeared on her face.

"Do you know why no man has ever touched me?" She suddenly asked.

Lu Xiao Feng shook his head.

"Because I detest men."

"Do you detest me as well?" Lu Xiao Feng could not help but ask.

Ou Yang Qing shot a cold look at him. Although she did not refute it, she did not concede the point either. Lu Xiao Feng began to laugh. He suddenly came to a realization -- Ou Yang Qing was not in love with him, not even a little inkling of feeling.

If the 13th Mistress did not tell him, Lu Xiao Feng would have never thought so himself. But it was just that all of those things were said by the 13th Mistress, maybe she purposefully tried to make Lu Xiao Feng believe Ou Yang Qing loved him to make him eat that entire plate of butter soaked snail shells. Not only did Ou Yang Qing not said a word about it herself, she had never even showed any signs of feeling that way.

After getting to the bottom of this, even though there was a little bit of sour taste in his heart, he could not help but let out another sigh, as if he had just been relieved of another burden. His demeanor all of the suddenly turned much more natural. He never believed in love at first sight anyways.

"What are you laughing at?" Ou Yang Qing could not help but wonder.

"I... I'm laughing at Honest Monk. I just passed off two burning hot pieces of coal to him!"

"Hot pieces of coal?"

"Satin belts."

"What satin belts?" Ou Yang Qing did not understand.

Lu Xiao Feng immediately explain all that had happened. When he was telling her about Si Kong Zhai Xing stealing a belt, he almost got angry again; when he got to Honest Monk, he was doubled over in laughter, acting in general like a little kid.

Ou Yang Qing stared at his face, a strange look appeared in her eyes once again. This man had just traded away two priceless satin belts for one single steamed bun, and still felt as if he had robbed the other party. She really have never met any one like this.

"Shame you haven't completely recovered, else I would have saved one belt for you so you can see the show."

"You don't have one single belt with you now?"

"Not even half of a belt."

"Are you going to the duel tonight?"

"Of course."

"Where's your belt?"

Lu Xiao Feng was dumbstruck. Only now did he realized that he had completely forgot to save a belt from himself. Could that possibly be the reason why Honest Monk ran away so quickly as soon as he got his hands on the belt, he was afraid that Lu Xiao Feng would suddenly remember?

"Tehehe!" Seeing the look on his face, Ou Yang Qing could not help but let out a little laugh. Running into such a fool did not happen very often. Lu Xiao Feng sat there with a dumbstruck look on his face for a long time, completely speechless. Suddenly he leapt to his feet and flew out of the

gazebo.

Coincidentally, Xi Men Chui Xue and Sun Xiu Qing were just walking up the flower path when they were greeted by him. Lu Xiao Feng did not even have time to wave hello to them as he flew by right in front of them, as if somebody was chasing him away with a broom.

Sun Xiu Qing looked up at Ou Yang Qing, sitting up there on the rail.

"Did you just piss him off?" She asked.

Ou Yang Qing shook her head with a smile on her face. Such a sweet smile she had, nobody would believe she could actually piss anybody off.

"Then did you bully him?"

"He doesn't need anybody else bully him, he does a pretty good job of beating himself up." Ou Yang Qing answered rather playfully.

Sun Xiu Qing looked her up and down a couple of times and smiled: "You seemed to have gotten to know him pretty quickly."

"I only know he's a big buffoon."

"But he is the smartest buffoon."

"He's smart?"

"When it comes to himself, he really is a buffoon, because he has never ever given himself a second thought. But if anyone should take him to be a real buffoon and try to trick him, then that someone is going to run into some bad luck."

"It doesn't matter if he's a genius or a buffoon, it has nothing to do with me." Ou Yang Qing matter of factly announced.

Sun Xiu Qing blinked: "Don't you like him?"

"Do you think every woman in the world should like him or something?" Ou Yang Qing mocked.

"I'm not talking about every woman, I'm talking about you!"

"Why don't you talk about something else?"

"You aren't interested in him at all?"

"No."

Sun Xiu Qing smiled again.

"You can't fool me, I can see right through you." He placed her hand gently on her belly as a joyous and proud gleam flashed in her eyes. "Not only am I another woman, I'm going to be a mother soon. A little girl like you can't put anything past me."

Ou Yang Qing did not reply, but her pale face blushed to a crimson red.

"You women are weird." Xi Men Chui Xue abruptly declared.

"What's so weird?"

"The more you like a man in your heart, the less interested you act on the surface. I really don't understand why you would do that."

"What do you want us to do? Leap into the men's arms the moment we lay our eyes on them?"

"Well you could at least be a little bit nicer and warmer to him and not scare him away."

"When we first met, was a nice to you?"

"No."

"Yet you were not scared away either."

Xi Men Chui Xue gazed at her, that warmth returning to his eyes once again.

"A man like me can't be scared away by anything or anyone!"

"That's right," Sun Xiu Qing playfully affirmed. "Men like you are exactly what we women like."

She walked over and took his hand in hers.

"Because women are like sheeps sometimes, we need to be chased down." She gently explained. "If you aren't brave enough to chase her down and just watch her run around back and forth in front of your eyes. Then you would never be able to get your hands on her precious horns."

Xi Men Chui Xue smiled.

"Have you given your horns to me?"

Sun Xiu Qing gently sighed: "I've given you my horns, skin, bones, everything."

In each other's arms, they silently stood there under the setting sun. They seemed to have completely forgotten there was someone else there with them, to have completely forgotten this entire world. The setting sun might be beautiful, but soon it would be dusk. How much longer could they spend in each other's arms?

Ou Yang Qing watched them from afar. Even though, in her heart, she was joyous over their happiness, she was also feeling an indescribable fear, a fear for their happiness.

Because she understood what kind of man Xi Men Chui Xue was, because understood Xi Men Chui Xue's sword. His sword was not that of

men.

A real, feeling, flesh and blood person could have never been able to employ such an unfeeling sword. That sword was literally approaching that of the "divine."

Xi Men Chui Xue was not a normal, real, feeling, flesh and blood person. His life had long ago been sacrificed for his sword, to his sword. It was as if he had merged with his sword into one, and was also literally approaching that of the "divine."

But now he had changed into a normal, real man, now he was also made of flesh and blood, he also had feelings. Would he still be able to wield such the same unfeeling sword? Could he possibly defeat Ye Gu Cheng?

The setting sun might be beautiful, but it was almost over and soon the moon would rise. Tonight's blood seemed destined to be stained red by one man's blood. But whose blood would it be?

Chapter 10 - The Seventh Satin Belt

September 15th, dusk. The spectacular colors of the setting sun filled the sky. Lu Xiao Feng came flying out of the bakery and began speeding down along the already stained red street.

He must find one satin belt before the moon rises. He could not miss tonight's duel. Absolutely not!

Because both Ye Gu Cheng and Xi Men Chui Xue were his friends, because he had discovered that, under the full moon, during their duel, something Earth shattering would happen, something even more shocking than the duel itself.

Of course, he could not get back those satin belts that he had given out. But a stolen satin belt was different. Not only could you demand what was stolen from you back, you could steal it back, or even take it back by force. He had decided to do whatever it took. The only problem was how was he going to find Si Kong Zhai Xing?

This man was like the wind, maybe even harder to keep track of than wind. Those who did not want to find would often run into him, but those who want to find him would never find him.

Luckily for Lu Xiao Feng, he still had one lead. He still remembered the name of that pharmacy that Si Kong Zhai Xing stumbled out of.

Si Kong Zhai Xing was much healthier than most of the people he had

victimized, there was no way he was actually purchasing some medicine at the shop. So if he had actually walked out from the pharmacy, then that particular pharmacy surely had at least a little bit of relationship with him.

The gold letters of the pharmacy glistened in the sunlight. There was one kid at the front door kicking a little shuttlecock around. When he saw Lu Xiao Feng approach, he immediately put to fingers in his mouth and whistled.

All of the sudden, up and down the street, left and right, a dozen or so giggling kids came streaming out onto the street and gathered in front of Lu Xiao Feng.

They still recognized Lu Xiao Feng, and of course, still remember that little song that could kill a man by either making him explode with anger or asphyxiate from laughter.

Lu Xiao Feng was practically giggling as well, he was sure these kids were about to sing "Si Kong Zhai Xing, is a monkey faerie" again.

But instead the kids began to sing at the top of their lungs:

"Xiao Feng is no bird, is a big stink bug,
Pointy headed stink bug, just dig holes all day,
Dog craps in the hole, so he eats the crap,
One big stinking pile of dog poo, even stink bugs can fly after it."

What kind of lines were those? That was almost not language at all.

Lu Xiao Feng could not decide if he should laugh or get pissed. He seemed to have forgotten that the lines he came up with were not particularly poetic either.

Of course, he knew those came up with those lines, Si Kong Zhai Xing had been back to this place.

After much effort, he finally got those kids to stop.

"Did that white haired old man come back?" He immediately asked, not taking any risks.

The kids nodded.

"He taught us that song, he said that's your favorite song and if we sang it good, you would buy us all candy!" They all shouted.

Lu Xiao Feng felt like he was about to burst again, who would want to buy others candy after being insulted?

The kids blinked as they looked up at him expectantly.

"How did we do?"

"Good, very good." Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"Are you going to buy us candy?"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed and laughed defeatedly: "Yes, of course I will."

Anything that others would not be willing to do Lu Xiao Feng often would be willing to do. How could he disappoint all these kids? He immediately went and bought candies, lots and lots of candies. Watching all the kids cheer, his heart melted.

Candy in mouth, a couple of the kids tugged at his shirt.

"The gramps is right, your are a good person, Mister!" They cheered.

"He actually said I was a good person?" Lu Xiao Feng seemed skeptical.

"He said you were very obedient even when you were a baby."

Lu Xiao Feng was even more incredulous: "How does he know what I was like when I was a baby?"

"He saw you grow up, he even used to hold you when you peed, of course he would know."

Lu Xiao Feng gnarled involuntarily, at the moment, there was nothing he wanted to do more than to tie that little monkey faerie up and cane a couple of times, maybe more.

"The gramps was just here, if you had showed up just a little earlier, Mister, you would have run into him."

"Where did he go?"

"He flew off again, and he got so high! Mister, can you fly higher than him?"

Lu Xiao Feng fixed his collar and his sleeves: "I'm not too sure, why don't you guys pay attention and see?"

Since Si Kong Zhai Xing was not here, there was no point for him to stay here any longer either.

But the kids immediately stopped him: "Wait a second Mister, we have one more thing to tell you."

"What's that?"

"That gramps left a little bundle for you. He told us we should give it to you if you buy us candy and throw it in the sewer ditch if you don't."

The fastest kid had already ran back into the pharmacy and walked out with a bundle in his hand. Not in his wildest dreams could Lu Xiao Feng have suspected that inside the bundle was two satin belts.

In the setting sun, the satin belts have already turned red in color. Other

than the belts, there was also a slip of paper in the bundle: "Steal one from you, give you two back. I'm a monkey faerie, you are a stink bug. You want to beat my ***? I'll make you eat sh1t."

Lu Xiao Feng laughed, laughed out loud: "The little bastard really can't ever stand being on the short end of anything can he?"

Why would he give him back two more satin belts after stealing one? Where did the other one come from?

Lu Xiao Feng did not bother dwelling on those questions. Now that these two satin belts are in his hands without so much of an effort, he was positively giddier than those kids when they saw how much candy he got them: "Pay attention now, tell me who flies higher ok?"

Still laughing, he somersaulted three times and landed, again, on the rooftops.

"You were higher! You were higher than the gramps!" The kids cheered.

With their bright eyes and innocence, they would never lie. Lu Xiao Feng felt even better, if that was possible. He felt as if he was floating, as if a pair of wings just grew out of his body and was about to fly to the moon. The moon might have have risen yet, but the setting sun have disappeared beyond the horizon.

The night slowly descended. Lu Xiao Feng returned to Delicious Fragrant Vegetarian through the back door. Through the window, he could tell the lamp had been lit. The soft and gentle lamp light made it

easier for him to spot Sun Xiu Qing and Ou Yang Qing through the open window even as far as the flower bushes.

Both of them were beautiful, and under the lamp light, they seemed somehow even more beautiful. But their faces were covered with an unspeakable anguish, somehow, even the lamp light seemed morose. Did Xi Men Chui Xue already leave?

Of course he did. There was only this lone lantern keeping them company in this room. The door was not completely closed. Lu Xiao Feng completely forgot to knock for his heart was heavy as well. When did Xi Men Chui Xue leave?

He wanted to ask, but did not. He did not dare, nor could he bear the thought. There were three empty cups on the table and one flask of wine. He poured a cup for himself and slowly drank the entire cup before pouring another cup and quickly emptying its contents again.

"He left." Sun Xiu Qing abruptly stated.

"I know."

"He said he wanted to leave a bit early so he could leave the city and enter again so people wouldn't think that he's been inside the city this whole time!"

"I figured."

"I hoped that you would get there early too, because... because he

doesn't have any other friends."

Lu Xiao Feng could not say anything and Sun Xiu Qing did not say anymore. She turned away and stared out into the night through the window. Night was slowly descending upon the land, a full moon had already slowly climbed its way up onto the sky. The wind was slowly getting colder as well.

After an untold amount of time, Su Xiu Qing quietly spoke up again.

"Tonight's dusk is very pretty, much more beautiful than it ususally is. But soon it will be gone." She closed her eyes as tears rolled down her cheek. After another long pause, she continued. "Why must everything good and beautiful be so fleeting? Why can't they remain in this world just a little bit longer?"

Was she asking the Heavens? Or was she asking Lu Xiao Feng? Lu Xiao Feng was at a lost as to how he should respond. Nobody knows how to respond to this question.

He finished another cup of wine before he could force a smile onto his face: "I'm leaving too. I promise I'll bring him back!"

He did not dare say anything more, nor did he dare to look at Ou Yang Qing. He was ready to give that extra satin belt to her so she could witness this duel of the century.

But he did not even bring the subject up. He knew Ou Yang Qing would undoubtly stay here to keep Sun Xiu Qing company instead. He

understood how Sun Xiu Qing felt, it was not anxiety, fear, anguish.... Those words could not possibly be adequate. At this moment, he just hoped to really be able to bring Xi Men Chui Xue back.

Just as he got up and was about to leave, Ou Yang Qing suddenly grabbed his hand, making him turn around and saw her eyes. There was tears in her eyes as well. Even a fool could see her concern and affection. Of course, Lu Xiao Feng saw it too, although he was having a hard time believing it. --How could the Ou Yang Qing who was looking at him now be the same Ou Yang Qing before who was cold as ice?

Why did she suddenly change? Only then did Lu Xiao Feng truly discover how little he really understand about women.

Luckily, he understood enough to know that a woman would never look at him this way if she truly detested him, nor would she grab his hand. Her hand was freezing, but it was tightly holding onto his hand. Only now did she truly understand how painful it it would be for a woman if she was to lose the man she loved.

The two of them stared into each others eyes for a long time.

"Are you coming back too?" She finally asked in almost a whisper.

"I will!"

"You promise?"

"I promise!"

Ou Yang Qing slowly looked away as she slowly let go of his hand: "I'll be waiting for you."

"I'll be waiting for you." That feeling inside of a man when he knows there is a woman is waiting is something that could not be replaced by any other feeling.

"I'll be waiting for you." What a beautiful, warm, and wonderful phrase. Lu Xiao Feng felt intoxicated, he was not drunk off of alcohol.

The bright moon was in the sky, and Lu Xiao Feng was facing yet another conundrum -- There was one extra satin belt on him to give away, but who should he give it to? None of those who deserves to have the satin belts were anywhere to be seen.

The streets were quite crowded, even more so inside of the restaurants and bars. All manners of people are sitting at the tables, discussing whatever their business of the night might be.

Lu Xiao Feng did not need to hear what them to know that they were waiting for the result of tonight's duel. Without a doubt, many among them have money riding on either Xi Men Chui Xue or Ye Gu Cheng.

Not only has this duel shaken the martial world, it had penetrated into the depth of the Capital's society. Never have duels had this kind of effect before.

Lu Xiao Feng found it all very humorous. He was sure that if Xi Men

Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng knew of this, they would find it all very humorous as well.

At this moment, he noticed a man walking out of a tea house across the way. This man was very tall and very skinny, well groomed, carried himself in a very cultured way, and wore a very sophisticated blue robe. There were streaks of silver in his sideburns. It was none other than "Master of South City", Du Tong Xuan.

This might not be Li Yan Bei's territory anymore, but it was still a rival of Du Tong Xuan's. Why would he suddenly appear here? And without even one bodyguard?

Lu Xiao Feng immediately chased up to him and patted him on the shoulder.

"Scholar Du, how are you?"

Du Tong Xuan was completely caught off guard as he snapped his head around. When he realized it was Lu Xiao Feng, he forced a fake smile: "Not bad, thanks you!"

"Where's your bodyguard?" He asked, referring to that mysterious man dressed in black from earlier.

"He left!"

"Why did he leave?"

"Small ponds can't keep big fishes alive, of course he left!"

Lu Xiao Feng looked around rather secretively before purposefully lowering his voice: "I got to hand it to you, coming here to Li Yan Bei's territory all by yourself?"

Du Tong Xuan smiled.

"This doesn't seem to be Li Yan Bei's territory anymore." He casually replied.

"He might be dead, but he still has a band of brothers!"

"After a man dies, even his wives can remarry, nevermind his 'brothers'!"

Even Lu Xiao Feng had to chuckle: "Looks like not only do you know Boss Li is dead, but you also know that his people have been swallowed up by White Cloud Outlook!"

Du Tong Xuan's face, however, remained emotionless. "In this business of ours, those who can't get their news fast doesn't last long." He coldly observed.

"Could Gu Qing Feng be a friend of yours?"

"He might not be a friend, but at least he isn't a nemesis either!"

"No wonder you are here by yourself." Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"If you, sir, have time, you are always welcomed to come visit my part of town. And you can bring however many people you like."

Lu Xiao Feng's eyes rolled around as another idea hit him: "Since you've already put so much down on Ye Gu Cheng, I bet you really would like to witness tonight's duel first hand!"

Du Tong Xuan did not agree nor refute that.

"I have one extra satin belt with me, if you are interested, I can give it to you!"

Du Tong Xuan did not answer for a long time, as if he was considering the offer.

"Boss Bu Ju is in that tea house as well."

"Oh?"

"Why don't you give him that extra satin belt?"

Lu Xiao Feng was speechless. Other people tried everything to get this satin belts, yet now that he was just offering it to Du Tong Xuan for nothing, unbelievably, he refused it.

Du Tong Xuan cupped one hand in another and gave a slight salute to Lu Xiao Feng.

"If there is nothing else, sir, I must be leaving. Fare thee well."

And just like that, he left, not even showing the slightest trace of wanting to stay.

Mystified, Lu Xiao Feng stood there like an idiot for a long time before suddenly looking up and noticing that Bu Ju had just walked out of the tea house. Bu Ju noticed him too as well as the satin belt on his shoulder. Suddenly, he broke out into a smile.

"Did you not sell off all of your belts?" It was a very odd looking smile, there seemed to be an indescribable hint of sarcasm in it.

"This satin belt isn't up for sell, but could be given away. If you still want it, I'll give it to you!"

Bu Ju shot another look at him, his smile becoming even more odd: "Pity I don't like to kowtow!"

"No need to kowtow."

"Really?"

"Of course."

"And I really don't want it either!" His expression suddenly dropped as he dismissively flicked his sleeve at Lu Xiao Feng and walked away, not even looking back at Lu Xiao Feng again.

Once again, Lu Xiao Feng was speechless. This was the same person who, earlier in the day, was willing to trade 3 huge pieces of jade rings for one satin belt, but now he did not even want it for free.

Lu Xiao Feng could not understand what was going on, but he did not have time to ponder either. The full moon has risen and he has to make it to the Forbidden City as soon as possible. He could not afford to be late.

The Hall of Supreme Harmony was inside the Gate of Supreme Harmony. Outside the Gate of Supreme Harmony was GoldenJadeBeltRiver which, under the moonlight, looked just like a golden jade belt.

Lu Xiao Feng made his way through East Gate, Grand Forefather Gate, and the Meridian Gate located underneath the Dragon and Phoenix Watchtower before finally arriving at the most forbidden part of this Forbidden City, the city within the city.

On the way here, there were platoons and stations of guards every few steps or so. It would be extremely difficult for anybody to get here without the satin belt on them, and even if they did get here, it was impossible for them to get any further in this literal mine field.

Even if there was not a shadow of a soul to be seen at the moment, there could be a martial art master within the Imperial Guards waiting to

ambush you around every dark corner.

There were all kinds of hidden dragons and crouching tigers among the Imperial Guard, some were real martial art masters who inherited their family skills, some were ambitious and brave young heroes, and some were also criminals who are trying hide from their enemies. In the end, nobody in the world dared to underestimate their ability. Under the moonlight, there was one person sitting on the bridge over the moat. The top of his head still shining.

"Honest Monk." Lu Xiao Feng immediately ran up to him.

"You got here early." He smiled.

Honest Monk was biting into another steamed bun when he saw Lu Xiao Feng ran up. Hurriedly, he tucked the steamed bun away and made some vague sound to acknowledge Lu Xiao Feng, hoping that he did not see the steamed bun.

Lu Xiao Feng laughed: "Seeing that in your hands, I suddenly realized something."

"What?"

"I realized that I forgot to eat dinner again."

Honest Monk rolled his eyes: "Are you going to try and trick this steamed bun from me again?"

Lu Xiao Feng glared back: "When did I ever lie to you? I traded you two satin belts for one steamed bun. Do you actually feel robbed?"

Honest Monk looked around for a bit before suddenly breaking out into a smile as well: "I'll be honest, I have three more steamed buns on me, plus another half of one. Are you interested in a trade?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to use in the exchange?"

"Everything I have, I have on me. Whatever you want, I'll give it to you!"

Honest Monk sized him up a couple of times.

"Looks like you don't have much more than me!" He laughed, as much at his own sorry state as at Lu Xiao Feng.

Lu Xiao Feng laughed as well.

"At least I have one more mustache than you, not to mention several thousand strands of hair."

"I don't want your hair or your mustache, I just want you to promise me one thing, then half of food is yours."

"And what's that?"

"That the next time you see me, you pretend you don't know me. That way, at last, I would be able to spend my days in peace."

Lu Xiao Feng threw his head back in laughter and patted Honest Monk on the shoulder as he sat down next to him, still not able to control this fit of laughter.

"So what do you say?"

"No."

"Don't you want my steamed buns?"

"Yes."

"Then why not?"

"Because I already have a steamed bun."

Honest Monk was befuddled.

"Where did you get your it from?"

"From Si Kong Zhai Xing!"

"Si Kong Zhai Xing?" Honest Monk was even more confused.

Lu Xiao Feng smiled.

"If it wasn't because of the little bit I picked up from him, how could I have possibly taken your steamed bun? So of course it came from him!"

Honest Monk did not say anything more, by now, he had realized there was one less steamed bun on him. It was already in Lu Xiao Feng's hand, it somehow appeared, as if by magic.

Honest Monk sighed.

"He doesn't learn anything else, he has to learn how to steal." He mumbled.

"At least thieves don't starve." Lu Xiao Feng laughed as he stuffed half of the steamed bun into his mouth. "What are you waiting for here?"

"For the Emperor to go to bed." Honest Monk replied with a straight face.

"So we can't go in just yet?"

"No."

"How long do we have to wait?"

"We'll know when the time comes!"

Lu Xiao Feng stood back up and looked around more closely.

"Has Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng arrived yet?"

"I don't know."

"How about the others?"

"I don't know."

"Did you see anyone?"

"I saw one and a half men."

"One and a half?"

"One was Yin Xian, he was the one who told me to wait here!"

"Who is the half a man?"

"You, at most, you can only count as half a man."

Once again, Lu Xiao Feng laughed. Suddenly, from the darkness, a shadow appeared. It flew through the air, giving a definitive display of the orthodox "Eight Step Cicada Chase". After just a few consecutive hops, the shadow was in front of them. Dressed in green, silver hair flowing, it was none other than the leader of the Wu Dang Sect, the Wooden Taoist.

"You really are quite honest." Lu Xiao Feng observed with a smile. "So you didn't end up swallowing what belonged to your fellow monk."

"I only know how to swallow steamed buns, shame that the steamed buns could be stolen."

The Wooden Taoist shot a look at Lu Xiao Feng and pretended to frown: "What kind of a man would stoop so low as to steal a monk's steamed bun?"

"When I have the chance, I'm going to steal from a Taoist monk too."

The Wooden Taoist smiled.

"At least this guy is honest, he confessed without even the slightest force being applied."

As he said that, another shadow appeared.

Lu Xiao Feng took one look and frowned: "Who did you give the other satin belt to?"

"Yan Ren Ying."

"This man isn't Yan Ren Ying." The Wooden Taoist immediately concluded.

"Nor is it Tang Tian Zong, nevermind Si Ma Zi Yi."

This person's movement was very unique, as he approached with his sleeves flapped in the wind. It seemed as if he was floating in with the breeze without using the slightest bit of effort.

Yan Ren Ying, Tang Tian Zong, and Si Ma Zi Yi were not capable of such effortless movements. In truth, counting Lu Xiao Feng, there was not more than three to five men in the martial world capable of this.

"Who is this?" Honest Monk wondered.

"He's not a person, not even half a person. He is a monkey faerie." Lu Xiao Feng answered.

Before he finished, the shadow shot towards them like a rocket, the clothes howling in the wind, as if he was about to run smack into Lu Xiao Feng. But just before it did run into Lu Xiao Feng, it suddenly somersaulted backwards three times in midair and gently floated down on the ground. It was a white haired old man, hunched over coughing up a storm.

"Do you two know who this monkey faerie is?" Lu Xiao Feng said with a straight face.

"'Si Kong Zhai Xin, is a monkey faerie.' I heard that song earlier this afternoon." The Wooden Taoist said with a smile.

"Looks like my disguise is completely wasted!" Si Kong Zhai Xing sighed.

"You shouldn't have showed off your lightness kungfu, other than Si Kong Zhai Xing, who else was capable of that?" The Wooden Taoist pointed out.

"Me." Lu Xiao Feng declared.

"'One big stinking pile of dog poo, even stink bugs can fly after it.'" Si Kong Zhai Xing sang with a smile.

Lu Xiao Feng pretended not to hear him and, instead, stared at the satin belt on him: "You stole one of my belts, and gave me back two."

"Well, you know me, always looking out for my friends. When I found out you forgot to leave one for yourself, I went and found two for you."

"Where did you find them"

"Don't forget that I'm the King of Thieves!"

"Did you steal the ones on Si Ma Zi Yi and Tang Tian Zong?"

Si Kong Zhai Xing just laughed and suddenly pointed in the distance:
"Why don't you go look at who is coming?"

Two more streaks of shadows approached from the distance. The person on the left seemed to always be shrugging his shoulders in midair, as if he was already just about to let loose a whole host of projectiles, using a lightness kungfu skill unique to the Tang Family. The person on the right, however, seemed very awkward and cumbersome, as if he had spent too much time in strength training. If Tang Tian Zong did not slow down for him, he would have been trailing far far behind him.

"Looks like the young master of the Tang Family is here!" Honest Monk observed.

"Who is the other person?" The Wooden Taoist inquired.

"Bu Ju!" Honest Monk answered. It really was Bu Ju. Once again, that mocking smile appeared on his face as he noticed Lu Xiao Feng was present, as if he was saying to Lu Xiao Feng: "You didn't give me a belt, I'm still here anyways."

Incredibly, there was a satin belt tied around his waist. In the moonlight, the belt's color would fluctuate from light purple to silver depending on the angle. Obviously, it was made from the same material as the other satin belts. There were only 6 belts. But, with the two on Lu Xiao Feng, one each on Honest Monk, the Wooden Taoist, and Si Kong Zhai Xing, plus the two belts on them, there were 7 belts.

How did 6 belts turn into 7? Where did the extra one come from? Bu Ju's face was filled with pride as proudly strode onto the bridge, but Tang Tian Zong's face was stone colored as he did not even look in Lu Xiao Feng's general direction. Lu Xiao Feng knew they would not tell him even if he asked; besides, he did not have any time to ask.

A shadow has shot out from within the Gate of Supreme Harmony. There was a long sword carried sidelong along his back and he was dressed in a uniform of an armed Imperial Guard. The uniform looked a little snug on him, obviously he had been enjoying himself a bit recently. But his movement was still agile. It was none other than one of the four Chief Wardens of the Imperial Guard, Yin Xian.

His face was also stone colored and his expression was grim.

"I know everyone here is the creme de la creme of the martial world, but I hope everyone realize what kind of a place this is. This isn't a tea house, if you want to chat, then you have come to the wrong place." He was talking like an official down to commoners, but everyone had to listen. They were taking a huge amount of risk and responsibility for this, so it was not unexpected that they would get somewhat testy. Besides, this really was not the place for a chat.

After that initial rant, Yin Xian's expression softened a bit as he looked over the 6 people present: "Well, now that everyone is here, please come in. Once you get past the big platform, there's a huge hall. That would be the Hall of Supreme Harmony."

"Is that also throne room?"

Yin Xian nodded.

"The tallest building in the Imperial Palace is the Hall of Grand Harmony. If those two masters must duel atop the Forbidden City, it's probably best for everyone to wait there." He took a look at Bu Ju, and then looked over at the hunched over old man and coldly continued. "Since you've made it this far, your lightness kungfu is undoubtedly pretty good. But I should still remind everyone, that isn't just any normal rooftop. It's difficult enough to get on it, but the roof tiles are all slippery glass tiles. So everyone should be careful with every step because all of us are going to suffer the consequences should one of us fall off the roof."

Bu Ju's expression had turned grim, that smile nowhere to be seen. Even Si Kong Zhai Xing seemed to quietly take a little deep breath. To this point, Lu Xiao Feng did not even have a chance to speak up.

He was just about to speak up when Yin Xian cut him off: "Don't get on the roof right away, there is someone waiting for you."

"Who?"

"If you want to see him, follow me."

With a simple shrug of his shoulders, he took off, as if he wanted to show off his abilities a little bit in front of all these people.

He was pretty fast, with just one simple hop, he shot out about 8 meters. Lu Xiao Feng followed him at a distance, not wanting to show him up. So Yin Xian tried even harder to show off as he did a somersault

and unleashed "Swallow Parting the Cloud."

But as soon as he made this move, a person quite gently and effortlessly past him with a small hiss as he pierced through the air. It was none other than that hunched over old man.

As soon as they passed through the Gate of Grand Harmony, Lu Xiao Feng's attitude and demeanor changed completely. Not only could he not smile anymore, even his breathing became quieter. The authority and power of the Emperor was still something that these heroes of the martial world did not dare to infringe upon.

Not even Lu Xiao Feng dared to. The two flights of stairs just in front of the Hall looked just like any other staircase made of several dozen slabs of stone. But just imagining the scene when the Emperor holds court with the top officials and generals solemnly standing on either side of the stairway waiting to answer to the Emperor's every beck and whim made even Lu Xiao Feng's body temperature rise in excitement.

All of the geniuses, prodigies, heroes, and leaders would wrack their brain, sacrifice their body, and some would even sacrifice their lives in hopes of just being able to stand on these stairs for a little bit.

The Hall of Grand Harmony was even more breathtaking. Looking up, the gleaming roof seemed to be in the clouds. Besides the Hall of Grand Harmony was the Hall of Secure Harmony. Besides the Hall of Secure Harmony, just west of the stairs outside the Pure Heaven Gate, up against the northern wall, was three flat roofed buildings. The black lacquered doors were shut tight and through the windows, a dim flickering of a lamp could be seen. The dim light illuminated a white plaque hanging on top of the door. On the plaque were 6 words that would stop any man in

his track: "Those Who Enter Shall Be Executed!"

Yin Xian had led Lu Xiao Feng here and stopped in front of that particular door: "Someone's waiting for you inside, go in!"

Lu Xiao Feng immediately shook his head.

"I can still read you know." He said with a rather weak smile. "I don't want to lose my head."

Yin Xian smiled as well.

"I'm the one who is telling you to go in, whatever happens, I'll take care of it. What are you scared of?"

Lu Xiao Feng looked at him and decided that he did not look like the type that was sending him into a trap. But here, at such a important and solemn place, even Lu Xiao Feng could not help but be especially careful. He would much rather just stand outside.

Yin Xian smiled again: "Can you figure out who is inside waiting for you?"

Lu Xiao Feng shook his head.

"Who?"

"Xi Men Chui Xue."

Lu Xiao Feng was momentarily flabbergasted.

"How did he get in?"

Yin Xian looked around to make sure nobody was around before moving closer.

"We all put money down on him." He whispered. "So of course we are going to treat him nicely and let him get a good rest so he would have the energy to take on that Outter Heaven Angel."

Lu Xiao Feng smiled as well.

"This place might be a restricted area, but His Majesty has gone to bed and it is long time until the morning court. So other than we Chief Wardens, nobody would come here!" Still smiling, he gave Lu Xiao Feng a pat on the shoulder. "So stop worrying and just go in. If you have a couple of secret moves that counters Ye Gu Cheng's moves, then give him a couple of pointers. We are all on his side anyways!"

He might have been pulling rank just a bit earlier, but now he seemed to be a completely different person. Even his smile seemed friendlier, he even went so far as pushing the door open for Lu Xiao Feng.

With a smile, Lu Xiao Feng gave him a pat on the shoulder as well.

“When you have time to take some leave, I’ll take you out for some drinks.”

The room was not big, nor were there any fancy furnitures, but it still possessed a natural austere and final feel, the livelihood and fortunes of tens of hundreds of thousands of lives have been decided here with a mere stroke of a pen.

The moment that a person, any person, first enters this room would undoubtedly be the most nervous and most excited moment of his life. As Lu Xiao Feng silently walked in, his heart seemed to be beating must faster than normal as well.

With his hands behind his back, Xi Men Chui Xue was quietly standing next to a little window, his clothes white as snow. Of course, he heard someone open the door and enter, but he did not turn around, as if he already knew that the person must be Lu Xiao Feng. Lu Xiao Feng did not speak up either.

The door had been closed and the lamp light dimly flickered in the dark and humid room. He suddenly noticed how cold his hands and feet were. He really wanted a cup of wine. Of course, there was no wine in this room, but how much blood, tear, and sweat have been spent here?

Lu Xiao Feng sighed in his heart. He finally understood that he was not the most troubled man in the world, that the people who come to this room everyday were much much more troubled than he would ever be.

Xi Men Chui Xue still did not turn around, but he suddenly broke the silence: “Did you go back to my place?”

"I just came from there."

"Did you see her?"

"Mm."

"How... how is she holding up?"

Lu Xiao Feng weakly smiled.

"You should know better than me she isn't some weak willed woman, the Three Valiants and Four Beauties aren't much less famous than we are."

He might be smiling on his face, but his heart was sinking. At such a crucial juncture before the duel, when the life or death moment was so close upon him, this man was still thinking about his wife, he was not even holding his sword.

Lu Xiao Feng was finding it almost impossible to believe that this was the same Xi Men Chui Xue he knew before. But he could not help but be somewhat comforted, because finally, Xi Men Chui Xue has turned into a flesh and blood human being.

Abruptly, Xi Men Chui Xue snapped around. "Are we friends?" He asked, looking Lu Xiao Feng in the eyes.

"Yes."

"If I die, will you take care of her?"

"No."

Xi Men Chui Xue's face turned deathly pale: "You won't?"

"I won't, only because you are not acting like my friend anymore. My friend is a real men's man and would never hope for death instead of hoping to live."

"I'm not hoping for death."

"But the only thing in your mind and your heart is death. Lu Xiao Feng coldly observed. "Why aren't you thinking about your past glories? Why aren't you thinking of ways to defeat Ye Gu Cheng?"

Xi Men Chui Xue glared at him, glared at him for a long time before he looked down and stared at the sword laying on the table. He suddenly grabbed the sword and pulled it out of its sheath.

The motion of his hands as he pulled out his sword was still that fast, still that elegant, there was absolutely no way anyone in the world could match him.

Si Ma Zi Yi's technique for pulling out his sword might be also very quick and clever, but compared to Xi Men Chui Xue, he looked like a

butcher pulling his cleaver out of a dead pig.

"Are you my friend?" Lu Xiao Feng suddenly asked back.

Xi Men Chui Xue paused before finally nodding.

"Do you believe what I tell you?"

Again, Xi Men Chui Xue nodded.

"Then I'm going to tell you, I'm almost sure I can handle an attack from any of the swordsmen in the world, save one man." He stared straight into Xi Men Chui Xue's eyes, not blinking once, slowly continued. "That man is you!"

Xi Men Chui Xue stared down at the sword in his hand, a strange shade of crimson suddenly appeared on his pale face. The lamp light seemed brighter, the shine on the sword seemed brighter as well.

Immediately, Lu Xiao Feng felt the forboding aura of the sword, so forboding was the aura that it made him squint. He knew Xi Men Chui Xue's confidence has returned.

To a dispirited man, one word of encouragement from a friend could be much more powerful than all of the medicine in the world combined.

The hint of a smile appeared on Lu Xiao Feng's face. Without saying another word, he quietly turned and walked out of the room.

Outside, the moon hung in the sky like a mirror.

Chapter 11 - Rescue at the Palace

September 15th, night.

The moon was clear as the water.

Lu Xiao Feng walked out of the ebony colored door of that meant death to its trespassers and made his way towards the Hall of Supreme Harmony under the shadow of the walls. He was in the middle of finding a good place to make his way up when he noticed a person standing there, alone in the shadows of the great hall, not moving an inch but in obvious distress and trouble.

He did not need to look a second time to know this person was Bu Ju. He noticed long ago that Bu Ju's lightness kungfu was tip top; getting to the golden, almost cloud covered, summit of this great hall, however, takes top level skills.

He had not forgotten the smile that Bu Ju had just given him, so he wanted to go over and return that smile back to Bu Ju. But once he made his way over, the only expression on his face was sympathy.

Sometimes sympathy can hurt as much as ridicule.

Bu Ju only saw him for an instant before quickly looking away.

'There once was this sparrow that fancied itself quite accomplished,' Lu

Xiao Feng suddenly said. "Because it could fly. So when he saw a tiger, he challenged the tiger to see who can fly higher. Do you know what the tiger did?"

Bu Ju shook his head.

He was going to leave, but stayed because he could not figure out why Lu Xiao Feng was telling him this story. Curiosity is something that everybody has.

"Obviously, the tiger couldn't fly, so it just took a deep breath and swallowed the sparrow," Lu Xiao Feng let out a small laugh before continuing. "Ever since then, no sparrow ever challenged a tiger to a flying contest again. Because sparrows finally understood that being able to fly high doesn't make you anything special."

Bu Ju laughed. His laughter was filled with gratefulness, his heart was filled with warmth. Suddenly, he discovered this Lu Xiao Feng was not quite the a\$\$h01e he had imagined him to be.

"Have you ever seen a tiger climb rope?" Lu Xiao Feng asked, patting Bu Ju on the shoulder.

"No."

"Me neither, but I've always wanted to see it."

"Have you ever seen a tiger that carried a rope with him?"

"No."

"Well now you have."

He had brought a rope with him all along, but was too embarrassed to take it out. He would rather die than to lose face.

With a smile on his face, Lu Xiao Feng took the rope in his hand and looked up.

"I'm not even sure if a sparrow can get up that high." He sighed with a miserable look on his face.

From below, the upturned eaves on the Hall of Supreme Harmony looked like hooks. Even the moon was hooked.

Nobody could jump that high in one leap, not even Lu Xiao Feng.

But he had other ways.

To Bu Ju, looking on from below, he resembled a gecko one moment and a chimp the next as he made several quick hops before disappearing from sight.

The others had gone up from the front, but he did not see because by then, he had already snuck his way to the back of the hall. But he was sure that none of them were as swift or agile as Lu Xiao Feng.

Because he already thought of Lu Xiao Feng as a friend.

A rope had already dropped down from over the upturned eaves. His heart felt even warmer. - To have someone like Lu Xiao Feng as a friend is quite nice indeed.

The roof of the hall was covered with gold colored glass tiles. Under the bright moon, it looked as if they were standing in a golden world.

Lu Xiao Feng secured the rope on one of the upturned eaves and turned around. He froze.

There should have been only 5 people up here, but the moment he turned around, he saw there was at least a dozen, each with a color-changing satin belt. And that did not include the 5 people he knew. Honest Monk and company were on the other side of the roof.

He did not get a clear look at these men's faces before another person came bounding over the top of the roof, white faced and sneering, none other than Fourth Warden of the Imperial Guards, Ding Ao.

"What is going on here?" Lu Xiao Feng had to ask.

"I was about to ask you the same thing." Ding Ao sneered back.

"Me?"

"How many satin belts did we give you?"

"Six."

"But now we have 21 men here, where did they get their satin belts from?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing." Lu Xiao Feng answered with an exasperated sigh.

Two more men came walking over the spine of the roof, Yin Xian in the front with "Hunan Swordsman" Wei Zi Yun following behind him.

Yin Xian was walking very fast, obviously very nervous, but Wei Zi Yun was a picture of calm, his pace much more leisure and composed.

On a surface as steep and slippery as glass tiles, a slow pace was much more difficult to maintain than a quick one. Never mind the circumstances made it even more difficult to keep one's composure.

At this moment, Lu Xiao Feng understood that this Chief Warden of the Imperial Guard was fully deserving of his fame. His martial prowess and composure was not below that of any master out there in the martial world.

Yin Xian quickly charged over.

"Did you two get anywhere?" He demanded.

Lu Xiao Feng shook his head, not knowing what else to do.

"This isn't something that can be figured out with a word or two," Wei Zi Yun offered. "Now isn't the time for thorough investigations either."

"Then what should we be doing?" Yin Xian asked.

"Put up extra guards and be ready for any sudden changes." Wei Zi Yun paused for a bit before continuing. "Send out the order, I want the security level of this area to turn up a notch, and nobody is allowed to move about without permission."

"Yes, sir." Yin Xian acknowledged.

"Fourth brother, you transfer over some off duty guards from Pure Heaven Gate, we might need them when the time comes. But from this point on, we only allow people to leave, not enter."

"Yes, sir!" Ding Ao took his leave as well. They had obviously developed a special set of skills and was able to make their ways up and down the hall with just one somersault.

Only now did Wei Zi Yun look over towards Lu Xiao Feng, he smiled.

"Why don't we take a look around?"

"Great!"

This was not a place one can see all at once. It almost did not look like a roof, more like a town square, but with the spine of the roof in the middle,

it also looked like a hill side.

There were 13 men on this side, most of them standing alone on the far side of the slope, not chatting with anyone, instead quietly waiting for the duel to begin.

They were not carrying any weapons with them, but they wore their hats extremely low and there appeared to some very delicate disguises on some of their faces. They obviously did not want to be recognized.

They did not seem to notice Wei Zi Yu and Lu Xiao Feng walked by right in front of them at all.

Where did they come from? Why are they being so mysterious?

Wei Zi Yun's pace was still that slow, his voice was still that quiet.

"Have you figured out who they are, where they are from?" He slowly asked.

"Oh?"

"These last couple of days, quite a number of underground people have arrived here at the capital. Rumor has it among them were several retired masters of the previous generation, not to mention some famed fugitives with very powerful enemies still looking for revenge."

"No wonder they didn't want to be recognized."

"These men may be secretive, but it doesn't seem like they are up to no good. Maybe it is just because they want to remain unknown but still see the two foremost swordsmen in the world duel."

"I hope so." Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"What I can't figure out is how did they get their hands on those satin belts?"

"Is it possible to get those belts outside the Palace?"

"Absolutely not," He explained. "These belts were tributes to the last emperor from Persia, so there wasn't much to begin with. In the last couple of years, we are down to the last roll or two. Even the royal concubines treasure these belts to no end."

Lu Xiao Feng did not say anything for Si Kong Zhai Xing suddenly popped into his head.

"I do know that the 'King of Thieves' has also arrived in the capital, and is even here." Wei Zi Yun had seen through Lu Xiao Feng's expression.

"Do you think he stole these satin belts?" Lu Xiao Feng had to ask.

Wei Zi Yun smiled.

"We had just decided on this plan yesterday morning. Before that

decision, these satin belts would have been completely worthless to him. He would not have taken that much risk to steal them."

"But last night...."

"The 4 of us did not sleep last night," Wei Zi Yun casually cut him off. "Even if a fly got in here, we wouldn't have let him get out."

His voice was full of confidence, just what Lu Xiao Feng needed to hear.

"So he's not a suspect in your mind." He asked after letting out a sigh of relief.

"No."

"Then who is?"

"There are only 4 men who could have stolen the satin belts." Wei Zi Yun lowered his voice even more.

"Four?"

"The four of us."

Lu Xiao Feng let out another sigh of relief. He had wanted to say precisely just that, but instead it was Wei Zi Yun who did. It seemed not only was this Hunan Swordsman thorough in his logic, but fair too.

"You probably have thought about this too. I have heard that people were offering 50,000 taels of silver to buy one of these satin belts. Money comes even easier to those men in the criminal world, so they were probably offering even more."

"Greed kills men, for greed tempts men's heart," Lu Xiao Feng sighed. "Money can literally make some people do anything."

Wei Zi Yun sighed as well.

"Yin Xian has traveled everywhere, has friends from all over, throws money around like it's dirt. Ding Ao is still young, can't help but be a bit wild. Du Fang might be steady and reliable, but he is still quite ambitious and have long had the urge to start his own sect, creating his own legacy. So he has always kept contact with his friends from the outside. These are all very costly habits, something a salary of a 6th level imperial guard can't possibly afford."

{Translator's Note: Gu Long has proven to be wildly inconsistent with the name of the 4th warden of the Imperial Guard, at first it was Du Fang, but after this one last usage, he switches over to Du Wan for the rest of the book. I guess I'll make the correction in the copy-editing process and just stick with one name, but at least for now, please keep in mind that Du Fang and Du Wan are the same person.}

He turned and looked into Lu Xiao Feng's eyes.

"But they are all my brothers, without tangible evidence, I can't say anything, no matter what I think. Because I can't risk damaging our

relationship."

"Are you asking me to find some tangible evidence for you?"

A smile appeared on Wei Zi Yun's face.

"You are already knee deep in this matter, don't you think figuring out the truth would be good for everybody involved?"

A different kind of smile appeared on Lu Xiao Feng's face.

He suddenly discovered he was right about this man, he really was an old fox.

Fewer men were on the other side of the rooftop. Other than Honest monk, Si Kong Zhai Xing, the Wooden Taoist, Tang Tian Zong, and the newly arrived Bu Ju, there were just Yan Ren Ying and the Ancient Hermit.

Si Ma Zi Yi, amazingly, was not here.

"Master Si Ma had an emergency and had to return down south and let me have his satin belt instead." The Ancient Hermit would later explain.

Lu Xiao Feng understood how Si Ma Zi Yi felt. A person like him had to go back home.

He did not feel worthy enough to meet Lu Xiao Feng face to face again.

Some older sect masters in the martial world loved the pomp and circumstance, the fluff of it all, and would never offer to buy some mysterious satin belts from nowhere, and people would never try to sell it off onto them.

That was why some people never bothered to show up.

"I have ordered all 4 gates to the Forbidden City closed. From this moment on, nobody will be able to enter." Wei Zi Yun informed Lu Xiao Feng.

"What about Ye Gu Cheng?"

"The Master of White Cloud Castle had arrived long ago."

"Where is he?"

"They had agreed to duel at midnight, so I have already arranged that they be given a room to rest in one of the dwellings outside of Grand Legacy Gate. From the looks of it...."

"What? How does he look?"

"He looks very ill," Wei Zi Yun sighed. "Looks like the stories about him not fully recovered from his injuries were not unfounded."

He did not say anymore but instead suddenly broke out into a smile.

"Seems like those friends over there are waiting for you to go over, if you please."

There really was several pairs of eyes staring at Lu Xiao Feng over there. -Si Kong Zhai Xing's eyes were smiling. Honest Monk's eyes were angry. Bu Ju and Yan Ren Ying's eyes were grateful.

Lu Xiao Feng walked over and patted Yan Ren Ying's shoulder and smiled: "How come you were late?"

"I... I was actually too scared to come."

"Scared? Why were you scared?"

Yan Ren Ying seemed to blush.

"If it wasn't for Master Honest's help, I would probably be standing down below anyways."

"Master Honest?" Lu Xiao Feng cackled. "That's the first time I've ever heard anybody call him that."

He wandered over to Honest Monk, smile still on his face, as if he was going over to pick on Honest Monk.

Who knew that he had just taken two steps before suddenly reaching out and, quick as lightning, grabbed Si Kong Zhai Xing's wrist.

The person most shocked was Si Kong Zhai Xing himself.

"I already returned those satin belts to you, what more do you want from me?" He almost yelped.

"That's exactly what I want to ask you." Lu Xiao Feng coldly demanded. "Where did you get those 2 satin belts?"

"Do I have to tell you?"

"If you don't, then this hand of yours will never steal anything ever again."

The sounds of bones grinding were already emanating from Si Kong Zhai Xing's hand.

"Even if I told you, you wouldn't believe me." Si Kong Zhai Xing sighed and put up a brave smile.

"Try me!"

"I didn't steal those two satin belts, somebody bought them for me, because that person owed me."

"Who is this person?"

"Look, this person went through all that trouble, not to mention spent tens of thousands of taels of silver to buy me those belts. And all this person wanted in return was for me to keep a secret. Even if I'm not a good friend, you can't expect me to sell out this quickly can you?"

"How quickly can you sell out?"

"Two or three days, at least."

By then, this whole matter would have already settled, by then this piece of information would not mean anything anymore.

Lu Xiao Feng's eyes glowed.

"Did that person just ask you to keep a secret for two or three days?"

Si Kong Zhai Xing did not answer yes, nor did he say no.

"So there is no way you'll tell me right now?"

"Go ahead and crush my hand, it won't make a difference." Si Kong Zhai Xing casually replied. "I've been thinking about going into a different line of work anyways."

Lu Xiao Feng knew full well that while he might be completely shameless when it comes to thievery, he would never betray a friend. So he suddenly broke out into a smile.

"Actually, even if you don't tell me, I already know."

"You do?" Si Kong Zhai Xing smiled back. "Why don't you tell me?"

Lu Xiao Feng whispered a name into Si Kong Zhai Xing's ear.

Si Kong Zhai Xing suddenly found it impossible to smile, but Lu Xiao Feng's eyes remained aglow. He knew his guess was correct.

All these small, seemingly unconnected threads were finally starting to come together, but there was still one final piece missing.

Si Kong Zhai Xing sighed again.

"And he accuses me of being a monkey demon," he mumbled to nobody in particular, "if you ask me, he...."

He was suddenly interrupted as Yin Xian flew onto the roof.

"The Master of White Cloud Castle has arrived!"

Under the moonlight, a white shadow appeared, shifting and floating with the wind. His lightness kungfu was not beneath that of Si Kong Zhai Xing.

Si Kong Zhai Xing sighed again.

"I didn't know Ye Gu Cheng was this agile and fast as well."

A strange emotion appeared in Lu Xiao Feng's eyes, only after a long pause did he finally let out a sigh.

"If he wasn't this fast, how could he possibly execute that Outer Heaven Angel?"

The moon hung overhead.

The spine of the roof was filled to capacity. Beside those 13 mystery men of unknown origins, there were 8 or so sabre carrying men in Imperial Guard uniform as well. They were obviously highly skilled practioners within the guard who were interested in catching a glimpse of these two famed swordsmen.

It was actually a much better view from above up there on the spine of the roof.

In the moonlight, it was obvious that Ye Gu Cheng's complexion was very pale. But Xi Men Chui Xue's complexion was just as pale, and seemingly a little angry too.

The two men both wore white, white as the snow, not a spec of dirt on them, and their faces were completely devoid of emotions as well.

At this moment, it was as if the two of them have turned into their swords: cold, cruel, and sharp. Completely devoid of human emotion.

As they look into each others eyes, their eyes seemingly began to glow.

Everybody stood a fair distance away. Even though their swords were still sheathed, the aura of their swords were suffocating.

-Such strong auras were actually emanating from their bodies.

-The source of the fear was them, not the swords in their hands.

"Many years since last we met, how have you been?" Ye Gu Cheng suddenly said.

"Fortunately, everything is fine, thank you for the help."

"The past is the past, why bring it up again? Both of us have to give our all in today's duel."

"Yes."

"Very well."

His voice had already seemed weak, but after an exchange or two, even his breathing began to get labored.

But there was still no emotion on Xi Men Chui Xue's face, as if he did not notice, instead he presented his sword.

"This sword is a world class weapon, the blade is one meter and 24 centimeters long and it weighs exactly 4.3125 kilograms."

"Good sword."

"Very good sword."

"This sword is the pinnacle of sword making knowledge and skill from over the seas." Ye Gu Cheng presented his sword too. "Slices through floating hair. Blade 1.1 meters, weight 3.25 kilograms."

"Good sword."

"Always has been."

Even though the swords were in front of them, neither sword has been unsheathed. -The drawing of ones sword is an essential part of a sword skill. The two of them were obviously about to duel in that as well.

"Both of you gentlemen are famed sword masters of our times. I am certain there is no poison on the blades, nor will there be any hidden weapons present." Wei Zi Yun suddenly piped up.

Not a sound was heard, only the sound of men breathing hung on the air. Everybody waited for him to continue.

"But because the unprecedented nature and level of this duel, I humbly

ask if the two participants can mutually inspect each others sword, for the sake of everybody else present."

"My sentiments exactly." Ye Gu Cheng immediately concurred.

Xi Men Chui Xue did not. Only after a long pause did he finally gave a little nod.

A month ago, he would have never agreed to this. How could he part with his weapon this close to the moment of life and death?

But he has changed.

"I will only hand my sword over to one man." He slowly declared.

"Would that someone be Master Lu Xiao Feng?" Wei Zi Yun inquired.

"Yes."

"And you, Master Ye?"

"No point in having two men do the job of one. Master Lu have my deepest trust as well."

Si Kong Zhai Xing nearly scoffed.

"This is the same guy who would even steal steamed buns off of a

monk, and there are still people who trust him? Strange world indeed."

He was mumbling quietly to himself, but at this moment, everybody heard every word.

While the Wooden Taoist tried hard to keep himself from laughing out loud, Bu Ju suddenly spoke up.

"Hero Lu is kind and chivalrous. I would gladly place my life in his hands, never mind a sword."

Yan Ren Ying immediately followed: "I, Yan Ren Ying, might be a small nobody, but my admiration for Master Lu is as great as Chief Bu's."

Of course, Yan Ren Ying was not a simple nobody, and Heaven Splitting Palms Bu Ju's thunderous voice was even louder than the fame of his name. The way the two of them immediately spoke up made it seem as if the two of them were afraid others might get the wrong impression of Lu Xiao Feng.

What could Si Kong Zhai Xing do but laugh?

"Don't forget everybody is here to watch Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng."

"I know."

"But right now, it seems like everyone is looking at you."

Lu Xiao Feng let out a little laugh at that remark before making his way over to where Xi Men Chui Xue stood. Without a word, he took Xi Men Chui Xue's sword in hand before turning towards Ye Gu Cheng and doing the same.

"Really are quite a pair of swords." He mumbled to himself.

"Will Master Lu please exchange the sword so that the two gentlemen may inspect each others sword?" Wei Zi Yun said.

"You want me to hand Xi Men Chui Xue's sword to Ye Gu Cheng and Ye Gu Cheng's sword to Xi Men Chui Xue?"

"Precisely."

"No."

"Why not?" Wei Zi Yun was a bit taken aback at the reply.

"I just got my hands on these two priceless swords, how do you expect me to be willing to give them up that easily?" Lu Xiao Feng explained.

Wei Zi Yun was dumbfounded.

Everybody was dumbfounded.

Lu Xiao Feng held both swords under his arm. With a simple move, both swords were drawn. The aura of the swords were blinding. Even the full moon hanging overhead seemed to lost some of its luster.

Everybody was asking themselves the same question: "If I got my hands on those two swords, would I be willing to give them up that easily?"

"Only the worthy can wield divine tools, I trust everyone hear has heard of such a saying?" Lu Xiao Feng asked rhetorically.

Nobody replied. Nobody knew what to do.

"Well I have, and I can tell right now there is nothing fishy about either of these swords." Lu Xiao Feng answered himself.

By the time he finished, the swords were sheathed once again. With quick flicks of his arm, Lu Xiao Feng tossed a sword back to Xi Men Chui Xue and the other back to Ye Gu Cheng before calmly strolling back to his old spot on the roof.

"What the hell did you just do all that for?" Si Kong Zhai Xing demanded out of curiosity.

"I just wanted to make it clear to all fo them, next time you got something like this, don't look at me." Lu Xiao Feng casually explained. "I have enough headaches already, I can't be bothered with this kind of pointless exercises anymore."

"This is pointless?"

"There is no past, no history between these two men. Yet at this moment neither would like nothing better than to stab their sword through the other's throat. If this isn't pointless, then what is?"

Si Kong Zhai Xing understood. He was hoping that Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng would show some restraint and not go for the fatal blow. A contest of skills does not have to end in death.

Of course, others understood as well. Wei Zi Yun humphed a couple of times to himself before proceeding: "The midnight hour has passed and there is an early morning session scheduled at the court tomorrow. So it is my hope that the duel be limited to one hour in duration and past that a draw will be declared. When two masters meet, the difference really comes down to one single move, so I believe a one hour time limit is more than enough."

He did not bring up the sword exchange again, so the duel was finally about to commence. Once again, everyone steadied themselves in anticipation.

Xi Men Chui Xue held the sword in his left hand and let his right hand drop down naturally, as he seemed completely oblivious to what had just happened. To observers, he reminded them of an unsheathed sword, cold, piercing, cruel.

Ye Gu Cheng, on the other hand, looked even worse for wear. He moved the sword so that he held it flush against his back, but his movement was seemingly sluggish and was coughing non-stop, but very lightly.

Compared to Xi Men Chui Xue, he looked positively ancient and weathered. Sympathy had appeared in many eyes among the observers for the outcome of the battle could already be predicted.

But Xi Men Chui Xue's face the same, as if he did not see any of this at all. He had always been a passionless man.

His sword was even more passionless!

Finally, Ye Gu Cheng was able to stop his cough and hold his head high to stare back at the sword in his hand.

"Swords are bringers of death," he began, "in the 30 years since I started training as a boy, I could have died at any moment under the blade of a sword or any other weapon of death."

Xi Men Chui Xue listened in silence.

Ye Gu Cheng took a minute to catch his breath before continuing: "So for tonight's duel, neither you nor I need to hold anything back. For a student of the sword, to die beneath the blade of a master swordsman is a death to be desired, a death without regret."

"Yes." Xi Men Chui Xue replied.

Some in the audience were silently cheering. They had shown up to watch two of the greatest swordsmen of all time duel to the best of their abilities. If they held back, then what was the point?

Ye Gu Cheng took a deep breath: "En garde!"

"Wait." Xi Men Chui Xue suddenly said.

"Wait? How much longer do we still have to wait?"

"Until the wound stops bleeding."

"What bleeding? Who is wounded?"

"You!"

Ye Gu Cheng let out a deep sigh and looked down at his chest, suddenly, he looked on the verge of following over.

Following his eyes, everybody suddenly noticed that his snow white shirt was stained with the bright red colors of blood.

So he was wounded after all, and the wound have not healed. Yet this proud person gritted his teeth and showed up anyways, not willing to back down despite certain death.

"My sword might be a bringer of death, but it would never kill anybody with a deathwish." Xi Men Chui Xue coldly mocked.

"Are you saying I came here to die?" Ye Gu Cheng fiercely demanded.

"If you aren't, then come back here next month, I'll wait one month for you as well."

He suddenly leapt into the air and flew off the roof.

Ye Gu Cheng tried to chase him down.

"You...." Was all he could yell out before blood filled his mouth. His body could not hold up any longer.

Right now, not only could he not chased down Xi Men Chui Xue, even a small child might give him trouble.

Looking at each, once again, everybody was dumbfounded.

From the very beginning, the circumstances of this duel was in flux, and now, at the last critical moment, it took the strangest turn of all.

Si Kong Zhai Xing suddenly burst out laughing, almost doubling over.

"What are you laughing at?" Honest Monk shot him a look.

"I'm laughing at those guys that spent tens of thousands of taels of silver to get their hands on those satin belts." Si Kong Zhai Xing managed to spit out between chuckles.

But he had laughed too early, for at this precise moment, Lu Xiao Feng suddenly took off, shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Stop!"

Si Kong Zhai Xing might have laughed a moment too soon, but Lu Xiao Feng was a moment too late.

Tang Tian Zong had already dove behind Ye Gu Cheng and, with a quick flick of his hands, threw up a dark mist of sands into the air.

The same Ye Gu Cheng who was having trouble standing upright suddenly, in shock, took off in a somersault with the elegance and agility that did not seem possible for a man in his condition.

Pity his move was a moment too late too.

The sons and disciples of the Tang family rarely ever miss once they make their move, not to mention Tang Tian Zong had prepared ahead of time and chosen his moment carefully, making it almost impossible to defend against his move.

"Ah!" With a sickening scream and a thud, Ye Gu Cheng's body fell back onto the roof midsomersault. On that snow white robe of his, there appeared another mist of black.

This was precisely the famed "Soul Chasing Sands" of the Tang family. When released in close proximity, it was even more powerful than the Poison Bamboo Darts.

Everyone in the martial world knew, if one pellet of the poison lands on your face, then you had to slice away that half of your face, if it landed on your hand, then you chop off that hand.

But now countless number of them have landed on Ye Gu Cheng's body. He suddenly rolled over to Tang Tian Zong's feet. and screamed: "The antidote, give me the antidote!"

"My two eldest brothers have all been crippled for life by your hands," Tang Tian Zong coldy replied through his gritted teeth. "With this much enmity between you and my family, why would I give you the antidote?"

"That... that's between you and Ye Gu Cheng, it has nothing to do with me!"

"And you are not Ye Gu Cheng?" Tang Tian Zong mocked.

Struggling to control himself, Ye Gu Cheng shook his head and suddenly ripped a layer of skin off of his face. It was a mask made out of human skin.

His face was ugly and thin, his eye sockets were extraordinarily sunken. It was none other than that mysterious black clothed man who was Du Tong Xuan's bodyguard.

Lu Xiao Feng had met him twice, once in the bath, and another time was at the Oriental Spring Pavilion.

From his skills and agility, Lu Xiao Feng could tell he had not come to the capital just to be Du Tong Xuan's bodyguard, but never would he have dreamt that he would become Ye Gu Cheng's double.

Even with the full moon overhead, moonlight was no match for lamp light, and Lu Xiao Feng knew Ye Gu Cheng was wounded, so his face would be sickly. Not to mention he was never that familiar with Ye Gu Cheng's voice nor his various mannerisms.

Add on top of that Ye Gu Cheng was new in the martial world, so there was not that many people who had seen him to begin with.

If not for all of that, this disguise would have never fooled everyone present, no matter how ingenious and perfect it was.

"Who the hell are you?" Eyes red with fury, Tang Tian Zong demanded. "Where is Ye Gu Cheng?"

The pretender opened his mouth to answer, but no sound came out. Even his tongue was cramping, making it impossible for him to speak.

The Soul Chasing Sands of the Tang family was truly capable of chasing your soul away in a blink of the eye!

Tang Tian Zong immediately produced a wooden flask and poured its entire contents down the man's throat. If he wanted to find Ye Gu Cheng, he must save this man's life.

For other than him, nobody knew where Ye Gu Cheng was, nor did

anybody knew why this peerless and world famous swordsman sent a stand in to this duel.

"What in the world is happening?" Si Kong Zhai Xing wondered out loud. "Even I'm confused out of my mind."

"You might be confused, but I'm not." Lu Xiao Feng replied coldly.

"You know why Ye Gu Cheng didn't show up? Then where is he?"

Lu Xiao Feng's eyes were aglow, but he did not answer. Instead he suddenly jumped over to Wei Zi Yun's side: "Do you know of a eunuch in the palace that goes by the name of Wang?"

"Manager Wang?"

"Yes! Him! Does he have access to those satin belts?"

"He was a reading pal of the current Emperor while His Majesty was studying in the South Library. After His Majesty ascended to the throne, he really solidified his position as His Majesty's favorite...."

"I'm just asking you this: other than the 4 of you, could he get his hands on those satin belts?"

"Yes!"

The glow in Lu Xiao Feng's eyes turned even brighter: "Has His Majesty turned in for the night?"

"His Majesty is very diligent in his duties and never misses morning court. So His Majesty turns in very early every night."

"Where?"

"Even though His Majesty's ascension was long ago, His Majesty retained the love of books from His Majesty's days as the crowned prince. So His Majesty often spends the night in the South Library."

"Where is the South Library? Take me there."

Yin Xian had heard enough: "You want us to take you to see His Majesty the Emperor? Are you insane?"

"I'm not insane, but if you don't take me there, you will soon all be."

"He really is insane," Yin Xian concluded. "Not only is he spewing all that crazy talk, he want to help the rest of us literally lose our heads."

Lu Xiao Feng sighed: "I don't want you to lose your heads, I want to help you guys save your heads."

Wei Zi Yun was silent in thought the entire time: "I guess I'll trust you one more time."

"Are you actually going to take him to the Emperor?" Yin Xian almost yelled.

Wei Zi Yun simply nodded.

"Come with me, all of you...."

"Thump! Thump! Thump!" Suddenly, they were interrupted by the sound of a human head rolling down from the top of the roof.

A headless corpse wearing the uniform of the Imperial Guards quickly followed the head down.

Shocked, Wei Zi Yun turned to see the other 6 Imperial Guards were already accosted by 12 of the mysterious men. In the hand of the 13th man was a bright and curved sabre. A bright, curved, and bloodstained sabre.

Just a moment ago, these 13 men did not seem to know each other, but now it turned they were together all along.

"How dare you commit murder here?" Yin Xian shouted in fury. "Do you know that this is punishable by death?"

"As long as the head that rolls isn't mine, why should I care if a few more rolls?" The man retorted.

Hand on sword, Yin Xian prepared to strike.

"If you move a muscle, then there will be one less head attached to a body on this roof."

Yin Xian did not move, but that did not stop him from unleashing a torrent of curses. Curses so vulgar, nobody could believe it was possible for a person of his stature to utter such words.

"Shut up!" The 13th man shouted.

"I can't move, now I can't even curse?" Yin Xian mocked.

"Who are you cursing?"

"If you can't figure it out, let me curse some more to help you out."

The more he cursed, the more vulgar he got. The mysterious man was driven to such fury that he lifted his sabre to strike.

"Psh!"

Half a sword suddenly popped out from the front of his chest, spraying blood everywhere.

As a voice behind him mocked: "He's in charge of the cursing, I'm in charge of the killing...."

The mysterious man could not make out what was said afterwards as at

that instant, Ding Ao, who was standing behind him, had drawn his sword and, in front of him, Yin Xian, Wei Zi Yun, and Lu Xiao Feng all made their move.

The last thing he heard in his life was the sound of bones breaking.

The sound of a lot of bones breaking.

The moon remains clear and silent overhead.

Along the gold colored glass roof tiles of the Hall of Supreme Harmony, blood flowed quickly down the crevices.

Those 13 mysterious men in black had all fallen. Nobody cared who they were anymore.

The only thing on everyone's mind now was something even more mysterious, even more important--

Why did Lu Xiao Feng force Wei Zi Yun to take him to the Emperor in the South Library?

Why did the always careful and deliberate Wei Zi Yun acquiesce to his request?

This duel between Xi Men Chui Xue and Yu Gu Cheng might be a huge deal in the martial world, but it still only concerned those of the martial world. Why disturb the Emperor over it?

What kind of secret was behind all of these questions?

Si Kong Zhai Xing looked over at the star gazing Xi Men Chui Xue for a moment, then turned to Honest Monk, who was staring down at him.

"Monk, do you know what is going on here?"

Honest Monk shook his head.

"I'm not the person you should pose that question to."

"Then who should I ask?"

"Ye Gu Cheng."

September 15th, late night.

The moon was round like a mirror.

When the young emperor stirred from his dream, the moon was shining directly through his window and onto the jade colored bed curtains.

Under the moonlight, the fluttering bed curtains looked like a cloud or

a mist. But within the mist, there seemed to be a shadow of a person.

This was the Forbidden City. The emperor was still young and never needed to be attended to at night. So what kind of a person would dare to spy at the emperor's bedside at this time of the night?

The emperor immediately leapt up. Not only was he able to keep his composure, but his moves were quite agile too.

"Who is there?"

"You humble servant Wang An, here to serve tea for Your Majesty."

The emperor has treated Wang An as a confidant ever since he was a young prince, so while he did not order tea tonight, he did not want to make his loyal servant look back either.

"No need for your services right now, you may leave." He dismissed the servant with a wave of his hand.

"Yes, sire."

Every sentence uttered from the emperor's mouth must be obeyed. If the emperor ordered someone to leave, even if both of his legs were broken, that man would still have to leave, by crawling if necessary.

The strange thing was this time Wang An did not leave. In fact, he did not even budge, as if he did not have any intention to leave.

"You haven't left?" The emperor frowned.

"Your humble servant has something to report."

"Speak."

"Your humble servant would like for Your Majesty to meet someone."

He dared to wake the current Emperor in the middle of the night to meet someone?

Did he forget who he was, that what he has done so far was already punishable by death?

Since becoming an eunuch at 7 and entering the palace at 9, he had always been a quiet and prudent man. Now that he turned 60, why would he suddenly change and do something like this?

Even though his face dropped, the Emperor was still able to remain calm.

"Where is this person?" He finally asked after a long pause.

"Right here." Wang An made a gesture with his hand and 2 lamps outside of the curtains were quickly lit.

Another man appeared along with the lamp light.

A proud and strong young man, wearing a yellow robe.

Even though the lamps were lit, the man still seemed to be standing in a mist.

The Emperor could not see clearly, so he parted the bed curtains aside and walked out. His expression suddenly changed. Changed to one of unspeakable horror.

For standing in front of him was a mirror image of himself - the same build, the same face, and even wearing the same clothes.

"Bright yellow robe, collar and cuffs in black but golden trim, on which sewn 12 silk dragons flying amidst five colored clouds. One each in front and back, one each on either side of waist, one each on the cuffs, one each on the shoulder, and four on the collar. The bottom of the robe opens in the center."

This was the Dragon Robe the Emperor wears to morning court.

There is only one Emperor, the Son of Heaven, Master of Everything and Everyone. Nobody would ever be allowed to passed off as his double.

Who is this young man? How could he have the same face and build as we, the Emperor?

What is going on here?

Wang An silent stared at the 2 men in front of him, on his face was an indescribable smirk.

The young Emperor shook his head. Even though even his finger nails have turned cold, he was still able to gather himself.

He had the feeling that beneath Wang An's smile there hid a terrible secret.

"This is a close relation of the Emperor," Wang An patted the young man on the shoulder. "He is the son of the Southern Prince, and is the first cousin of his father's side to His Royal Majesty the Emperor."

{Translator's note: This title actually excludes the Ming dynasty as a possible setting for the Lu Xiao Feng story. Brothers of the Emperor were not given any titles during the Ming dynasty. Meaning the Lu Xiao Feng stories either takes place during the Qing dynasty, or isn't historically accurate.}

The Emperor could not help but give the young man another look up and down.

"Were you summoned to come?"

"No." The son of the Southern Prince's eyes were downcast.

"Do you know the penalty for entering the Forbidden City without

summon?"

The son of the Southern Prince's eyes were even more downcast.

"Royal descendants are subject to the same laws and penalties as all royal subjects. Even though we are merciful, we still...."

"Still cannot grant clemency to such a crime." The prince's head suddenly snapped up and stared back at the Emperor.

"Correct."

"If you knew the law, then why did you break it?" The prince demanded.

"You..." The Emperor was angered.

But the prince would not allow the Emperor to finish his sentence.

"Knowing breaking the law makes the act even worse. Even though we are of heart to save you, but the rules our forefathers laid down would not allow it..."

"Who are you?" The Emperor shouted in anger. "How dare you treat us with such disrespect?"

"We are subject to the Mandate of Heaven, named by the past Emperor, none other than Son of Heaven and the Emperor."

By now, the Emperor's fists were clenched tight, but his entire body had turned ice cold.

He had finally realized how terrible of a conspiracy this was, but even now, he was having trouble believing it.

The prince continued: "Manager Wang."

Wang An immediately bowed: "Your servant."

"Take him away and execute him at dawn."

"Yes, sire."

"On the account he shares the blood of our fathers, grant him a complete corpse and then ship him back to the Palace of the Southern Prince."

"Yes, sire."

The prince then shot a look at the Emperor and sighed.

"I really can't understand it, passing up a life of luxury as a little prince and coming to the capital to die. Why?" He mumbled to himself.

The Emperor let out a cold laugh. By now, he had obviously realized the

full scope of the conspiracy.

""Royal descendants are subject to the same laws and penalties as all royal subjects," Wang An spoke up. "Since you already know that, what more do you have to say for yourself?"

"Just one sentence."

"Well go ahead, I'm listening."

"Such a preposterous idea, how did you guys come up with it?"

Wang An blinked a couple of times before breaking out in laughter.

"I didn't want to tell you, but I can't keep quiet anymore."

"Go ahead."

"To be honest, this whole thing has been in the plans ever since the old prince visited the capital and I discovered that the young prince looks just like you."

"He bought you?"

"Not only do I live to gamble, I like to visit prostitutes."

When he got to here, that tired and worn face of his suddenly lit up in a

proud smile. But then he purposely sighed a bit: "So I have quite a lot of expenses and is always looking for an avenue to make money."

"You have quite a lot of guts too."

"No, almost none at all. If something wasn't a sure thing, I would never do it."

"And this is a sure thing?"

"I was originally very worried about Wei Zi Yun and those little rat bastards, but now I've found a way to distract them."

"Oh?"

"If a chess player hears there were two chess masters playing outside in the yard, would he stay inside?"

The answer is obviously no.

"Same with those who studies the sword. If they found out two world famous swordsmen were dueling out front at the Hall of Supreme Harmony, they wouldn't be able to stay inside either."

"Are you talking about Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng?" The Emperor suddenly asked.

Wang An was quite taken aback by the question: "You know about these two men?"

"With their fame and skills, you can't really blame Wei Zi Yun and rest of them for getting tempted." The Emperor casually observed.

"Everyone is human." Wang An nonchalantly observed.

"Luckily, there are some around us that are almost not human."

Just as he finished the sentence, there was a quick crack on the 4 corner pillars as 4 secret doors slid open and 4 men stepped out.

These 4 men were all not even one meter in height, their face, build, and cloth were all the same.

Especially their faces, the small eyes, big nose, protruding forehead, and shrunken mouth came together to form a rather comical face.

But there was nothing comical about the swords in their hands.

Half a meter long, the reflections of the swords were blinding. Three of them had 2 swords and the fourth with just one sword. The seven swords flickered and filled the room with flashes that made it almost impossible for anyone in the room to see anything.

But even if you were blind, you would still know who these men were - Mount Heaven's Hate, Seven Star Pond, Flying Fish Fort's Yu Brothers.

These four brothers were quadruplets and even though they were not tall, their sword skills were top notch made even more formidable by a seemingly telepathic ability that they share. While it might not be the best 7 seven formation in the world, there were not many in the world who could defeat them when using their family's Flying Fish Seven Star Swords.

Not only were their styles were strange, but their personalities were even weirder. So it was quite a shock that they would actually enter the palace and become the Emperor's personal bodyguards.

The reflections shone onto the Emperor's face.

"Kill!"

The reflections immediately began to move like shooting stars and fell upon the son of the Southern Prince and Wang An.

But Wang An's expression remain unchanged as the young prince calmly waved his hand: "Break."

As soon as he said that, a streak of sword flashed across the room like lightning, but shone like the rainbow.

The flashes intersect and "bang", "bang", "bang", "bang", sparks joined the flashes before everything disappeared into one flash.

Only one singular flash remained, because only one single sword remained in tact.

A long and ancient sword.

Of course, this sword did not belong to the Yu Brothers.

The Yu Brothers' swords were already shattered, and the Yu Brothers themselves have already collapsed onto the floor.

This sword was in the hand of a man dressed in white. Snow white robe, pale white face, ice cold stare. This man's had an aura of pride about him, an aura that was even more suffocating than that of his sword.

This was the Forbidden City, the Emperor was standing in front of him.

Yet it seemed as if even the Emperor was but a spec in his eye.

The Emperor's matched him in calmness.

"Ye Gu Cheng?" He casually observed.

"Didn't expect the Heavens to have heard of such an average citizen from the wilderness like myself."

"Outer Heaven Angel, one strike breaks seven stars, quite a skill."

"Always has been."

"You were a good man, why turn to crime?"

"Those who win are king, those who lose are the thugs."

"Thugs are thugs."

Ye Gu Cheng let out a cold snicker and brought his sword up to his chest.

"En garde."

"En garde?"

"Your Majesty's knowledge and composure already has few equals in the martial world. Your Majesty would undoubtedly be amongst the top ten masters if Your Majesty enters the martial world."

The Emperor laughed.

"Good eye."

"Right now, let the king not be king and the thug not be thug, between king and thug, let the stronger be the victor."

"Quite a 'let the stronger be the victor.'"

"My sword is in hand."

"Pity there's a sword in your hand, but none in your heart."

"No sword in heart?"

"The sword is straight, the sword is direct, the sword is strong. How could an evil heart hold a sword?"

The expression on Ye Gu Cheng's face changed a bit.

"In this moment, in this place, the sword in my hand is enough."

"Oh?"

"The sword in hand can injure others, the sword in heart can only hurt yourself."

The Emperor laughed, it was a loud and hearty laugh.

"Draw your sword."

"We have no sword in hand."

"Are you afraid to fight?"

The Emperor smiled: "Our skill is Son of Heaven's Sword, bringing peace to all under Heaven, calming the populous, ensuring good fortunes for one and all, and guaranteeing victories within a thousand miles. Our body is our sword. No blood dared to be spilled within 5 steps of the Son of Heaven."

He paused and stared straight into Ye Gu Cheng's eyes. "You should understand our meaning by now."

The pale white face of Ye Gu Cheng has turned green as his hand clenched his sword tightly.

"Are you not putting up a fight?"

"We are only subject to the Mandate of Heaven, dare you to make a move!"

The veins on Ye Gu Cheng's hand looked like they were about to pop as cold sweat gathered on the tip of his nose.

"With things at this stage, if you don't kill him, he will kill you!" Wang An could not keep quiet any longer and to coax Ye Gu Cheng to make his move.

"Don't worry," the young prince chimed in. "The world famous Master White Cloud Castle will not succumb to the weakness of a woman."

Ye Gu Cheng's face fluctuated between green and white before he finally stumped his feet and shouted: "I've never killed an unarmed man before, but I'll make an exception tonight."

"Why?" The Emperor replied.

"Because even though you have no sword in hand, there is a sword in your heart."

The Emperor did not reply.

"Like I said, the sword in hand can injure others, the sword in heart can only hurt yourself."

The sword in his head took off.

The full moon hung mid sky.

It seemed even rounder than usual.

Within the autumn breeze, the pure fragrance of the sweet olives floated. But carried within the fragrance was a murderous intent.

The wind breezed in through the window, the moonlight shone in through the window. Both wind and moon were cold.

But the sword was even colder.

Once the cold sword was unleashed, red hot blood must surely spill soon after.

But at the precise moment, a person suddenly flew in through the window.

His body seemed lighter than the breeze, lighter than the moonlight itself. But his name was as heavy as Mount Tai in the martial world.

Only one person can stop Ye Gu Cheng's poised strike.

Only one person can shock Ye Gu Cheng.

"Lu Xiao Feng!"

Ye Gu Cheng shouted. "What are you doing here?"

"Because you are here."

Ye Gu Cheng suddenly let out a long and tired sigh. "Why did I come here? Why did you also come here?"

Lu Xiao Feng replied with a sigh of his own. "You shouldn't have come here, I didn't need to come here. Pity both of us are here now."

"Pity."

"A real pity."

Ye Gu Cheng sighed again, but the sword in his hand once again turned to flash.

A sword from the west, an angel from the outer heavens.

But this sword flash was not directed towards Lu Xiao Feng.

As Lu Xiao Feng braced himself, the flash of the sword had already broken the window as the man followed closed behind, as if his sword and his body had turned into one.

Speed isn't just a stimulus, it is a very enjoyable rush.

Fast horses, fast boats, fast cars, and flying can all give a person this type of incredible pleasure.

But when you are running for your life, you would not be able to enjoy this rush.

Ye Gu Cheng loved speed. At White Cloud Castle, on nights when the moon was bright and the breeze fresh, he always enjoyed throwing his body against the wind as he flew underneath the moonlight.

It was always at those moments that he felt the most at peace in his heart and mind.

At this moment, the moon was bright and the breeze fresh, and, surrounded by golden pavilions and jade bricks, he was running at his fastest, yet his heart was a mess.

He was running. And there was so much he did not understand--

Where did this plan go wrong? Where was the flaw?

How did Lu xiao Feng discover the secret? Why did he show up?

Nobody could answer those questions for him, just like nobody knew where the wind that was blowing by his face came from.

The moonlight looked wretched and lost, as if in a mist. Ahead, in the shadows of the imperial city, a person stood, as if clothed in white snow.

Ye Gu Cheng did not get a clear view of this person, all he really saw as a shadow of a person that was whiter than the mist, whiter than even the moonlight.

But he already knew who this person was.

Because he suddenly felt an irrepressable sense of aura, as if an invisible mountain had just crashed down upon his shoulders.

His pupils dilated, his muscles tensed.

Other than Xi Men Chui Xue, no other human being could possibly made him feel such pressure.

By the time he clearly saw Xi men Chui Xue's face, he had stopped.

Xi Men Chui Xue had his hand on his sword, but his sword was still in its sheath. The sword aura did not emanated from the sword in the first place.

He was far sharper than his sword, far more lethal.

When their gaze met, it was like two swords meeting point to point.

Neither one moved, for this type motionless pressure was far stronger and more frightening.

A falling leaf drifted into the scene with the wind. It floated between the two men and immediatel fell straight to the ground, for not even wind could move between them.

This pressure and intensity might be invisible, but it is far from immaterial.

"Do you study the sword?" Xi Men Chui Xue suddenly broke the silence.

"I am the sword."

"Do you know where the essence of the sword lay?"

"Do tell!"

"Sincerity."

"Sincerity?"

"Only when your heart is sincere and just can you scale the summit of the sword. The insincere are noth worthy to study the sword."

Ye Gu Cheng's pupils dilated once more.

But Xi Men Chui Xue held his gaze.

"You are not sincere."

Ye Gu Cheng did not say anything for a long time.

"Do you study the sword?" He suddenly asked.

"Study has no limits, the sword even more limitless."

"Then you should know that those who study the sword need only be sincere to the sword and not to other men."

Xi Men Chui Xue did not say any more, for all that had to be said was said.

At the land's end is Tian Ya, at the word's end is the sword.

{Translator's note:Tian Ya literally means Heaven's Limit (or End). It's the proper name in Chinese for the end of the world. I left it in Chinese because the phrase would sound redundant in English. If there are any suggestions for how to translate this phrase better, please don't hold it back.}

The sword was in hand, ready to be unsheathed.

At this moment, there was a sword flash, but not their swords.

Ye Gu Cheng looked up. Only now did he realize that he had been surrounded on all side by a veritable human wall. Several dozens of cold and unfeeling swords flashed about, literally creating the links in this net.

Not only was there a sword net, but there was a forest of lances and a mountain of sabres.

Moonlight reflected off of the polished blades and shone cold light onto the metal armours. The power and intimidation of the Forbidden City was something unimaginable for any ordinary human.

Even the ever calm and collected Wei Zi Yun had drops of visible cold

sweat on his nose. With long sword in hand, he directed the troops into formation, eyes never leaving Ye Gu Cheng.

"Master of White Cloud Castle?" He demanded, gravely.

Ye Gu Cheng nodded in reply.

"Master resides outside of the clouds, your sword was divine, you were divine, why must you soil thyself with greed for the dirt of this world and do such an unwise thing?"

"You don't understand?"

"I don't."

"No, you wouldn't understand." Ye Gu Cheng coldly replied.

"Perhaps I never would, but...."

"But we do understand that the treason you committed means death to you and your family." Eyes beaming like a hawk, Tu Fang, "the Divine Eagle of the Steppe", shouted out from his position behind Wei Zi Yun.

Even though he made his name as a youth with his lightness kungfu and the eagle claws, he had been a swordsman since turning forty.

His sword was long but narrow, thus looking very similar to the swords

used by the Southern Seas Sword Sect, but in reality, his moves came from the true teachings of the Kun Lun Sect.

Ye Gu Cheng shot a look at his sword out of the corner of his eyes.

"Do you know what your crimes are?" He sneered.

Tu Fang did not understand the question.

"You didn't make it studying the sabre, isn't good enough with the sword, and yet you dare to treat me with such disrespect. That crime also carries the punishment of death."

Tu Fang's face dropped as the tip of his sword quivered in anticipation as he prepared to charge forth.

Once he charged forth, others would surely follow. Ye Gu Cheng's unparalleled sword skill would matter little as he would surely be cut down in a bloodbath.

But before Tu Fang could charge forth, someone had already stopped him.

"Wait!"

Xi Men Chui Xue suddenly interjected.

"Wait for what?"

"I want to say something."

At this moment, at this place, even though the swords have been drawn and the bows have been pulled, if Xi Men Chui Xue wanted to say something, nobody could say no.

Wei Zi Yun nodded ever so slightly and Tu Fang put his charge on hold.

"If I joined forces with Master Ye, is there anybody in the world who can stop us?"

Nobody!

And there was nobody who did not know the answer either.

Wei Zi Yun took a deep breath as sweat drops appeared on his nose again.

Xi Men Chui Xue maintained his gaze at Wei Zi Yun.

"Do you understand my meaning?"

Wei Zi Yun shook his head in reply.

Of course, he understood what Xi Men Chui Xue was saying, but he

would much rather pretend to not understand. He had to buy some time to think of a plan.

"I began studying the sword at the age of seven, and made my bones in seven years. I've yet to meet a worthy foe." Xi Men Chui Xue continued.

Ye Gu Cheng suddenly sighed and interrupted Xi Men Chui Xue. "'Only I fear in porphyry towers, under jade eaves, in those high places the cold wind would be more than I could bear'.... The loneliness that one knows at the top, how could these men understand it? And why do you bother trying to explain it to them?"

{Translator's Note: Ye Gu Cheng quotes a famous Chinese poem here written by Su Shi (aka Su Dongpo). The poem is about the loneliness he felt as he drank by himself on August 15th, the Mid-Autumn's Festival, with only the full Harvest Moon to keep him company. He starts off by asking whimsical questions at the moon and concluding that he would love to fly up to the moon, only he was afraid that it would be too cold up that high. A most appropriate lament for this occasion. The poem has been converted into song and sang by both Teresa Teng and Faye Wong. Full Chinese text with English translations here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shui_diao_ge_tou.}

Xi Men Chui Xue's gaze returned onto Ye Gu Cheng. His face froze in an indescribable expression. Only after a long time did he speak again: "Tonight is also a night with a full moon."

"Yes."

"You are Ye Gu Cheng."

"Yes."

"You have a sword in hand, as do I."

"Yes."

"So I finally have found a worthy foe."

Wei Zi Yun spoke up: "So you aren't willing to let him be executed according to the law?"

"Are you a subject to the Mandate of Heaven, to His Majesty the Emperor?"

"At this moment, I only wish for a duel with Master Ye. Life, death, fame, and shame means nothing to me."

"In your eyes, this duel isn't just more important than the law, but life itself." Wei Zi Yun concluded.

Xi Men Chui Xue's gaze shifted once more, this time to something far away.

"What's to celebrate about life? What's to fear about death? If I find someone who truly understands me, then I can die without regrets. To have a foe like the Master of White Cloud Castle here, it would be even more so."

{Translator's note: The questions Xi Men Chui Xue poses here is taken directly from Liu Tang of the Heroes of the Water Margins fame.}

To a person like him, a true foe really was more desirable and even harder to come by than a true friend.

Seeing the deep and faraway loneliness on his face, an indescribable expression appeared on Wei Zi Yun's face as well.

"Life and death might be light as the feather of a swan, but the law is as heavy and unmoving as the mountains." He sighed. "Even though I understand your meaning, I..."

"Are you going to force me to help him fight our way out before having our duel?"

Wei Zi Yun's fists clenched as sweat began to drip off the tip of his nose.

"This duel is going to happen, so you better make up your mind soon." Xi Men Chui Xue stated matter-of-factly.

But Wei Zi Yun could not possibly make up his mind under these circumstances.

He had always been calculating and decisive, never a step behind, never a moment of hesitation. But this time he simply could not take the

risk.

Suddenly, out of the forest of humanity, someone walked forward. And it seemed everyone was able to let out a little sigh of relief upon seeing this person.

For if there was anybody who could solve this matter, then that person would have to be Lu Xiao Feng.

There seemed to be a mist, yet there was no mist.

The bright moon was slowly setting to the west, yet the fog had not appeared.

Lu Xiao Feng walked into the scene with the moon hanging over head, his eyes locked squarely on Xi Men Chui Xue.

Xi Men Chui Xue's eyes were not looking back at him.

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly broke the silence: "So this duel really must happen?"

"Mm."

"And afterwards?"

"And nothing afterwards."

"So you are saying that, no matter if you win or lose, you won't meddle with this matter anymore?"

"Yes."

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly broke out into smile, turned around, and patted Wei Zi Yun on the shoulder.

"Still can't make up your mind?"

"I...."

"If I were you, I would be begging for them to get the duel started as soon as possible."

"Explain."

"Because no matter which one of them win or lose this duel, there's only good in it for you guys. What are you still waiting for?"

Wei Zi Yun was still mulling it over.

"The good I'm talking about here is good that happened to the old fisherman."

{Translator's Note:Lots of allusions in this portion of the story. What Lu

Xiao Feng is referring to here is a famous folk tale about a clam and a snipe (a type of bird) had each other within their respective shells and beaks and refused to let go until an old fisherman came by and caught both.}

Lifting his head, Wei Zi Yun looked at Ye Gu Cheng, then at Xi Men Chui Xue, finally at Lu Xiao Feng, and let out a long and tired sigh.

"Tonight might have a full moon, but this isn't atop of the Forbidden City."

"Are you saying you are going to allow them to go back to the Hall of Supreme Harmony?"

Wei Zi Yun actually smiled.

"If this duel is going to happen, then why let those who went through all the trouble to come here go back empty handed?"

Lu Xiao Feng smiled too.

"'The Hunan Swordsman' indeed! So very free and easy-going."

Wei Zi Yun patted Lu Xiao Feng on his shoulder and smile.

"And Lu Xiao Feng really is Lu Xiao Feng."

Chapter 12 - The Death of the Nemesis

Even though the moon was slowly setting in the west, it looked even rounder.

As if the moon was a bright and round lantern hanging below the upturned eaves of the Hall of Supreme Harmony. The men were above the upturned eaves.

A lot of men, but nary a sound.

Even Si Kong Zhai Xing and the Honest Monk had shut their mouths. Because they were able to feel that suffocating pressure and intensity as well.

Suddenly, with a sound like a dragon howling, sword aura filled the air.

Ye Gu Cheng's sword had been unsheathed.

In the moonlight, the sword looked pale white as well.

The pale white moon, the pale white sword, the pale white face.

Ye Gu Cheng stared the tip of his blade.

"En garde!"

He did not look at Xi Men Chui Xue, not even a glance, nor did he look at the sword in Xi Men Cui Xue's hand, never mind Xi Men Chui Xue's eyes.

This was a huge mistake in swordsmanship.

Duels between masters are like battles between armies, only when one gain a full knowledge thyself and the enemy can victory be in reach.

Thus one must pay careful attention and analysis to the foe's every move, every glance, every expression, even every reflex of muscle. Not even the slightest of details could afford to be lost.

Because any slight detail could be the key in deciding the duel.

How could an experienced and undefeated master like Ye Gu Cheng not understand this principle?

This was a mistake he would never have made under normal circumstances.

Xi Men Chui Xue's gaze cut, like a blade, through not only his hands, but his face, and seemingly his heart.

"En garde!" Ye Gu Cheng repeated.

"Not now." Xi Men Chui Xue surprisingly replied.

"Why?"

"Because your heart has not calmed yet."

Ye Gu Cheng did not reply.

"If a man's heart is in chaos, his sword will be too." Xi Men Chui Xue continued. "If a man's sword is chaotic, then he will die."

"Are you saying that I've already lost?" Ye Gu Cheng coldly sneered back.

"At this moment, if you lose, it's not because of skill."

"And that's why you don't want to fight at this moment?"

Xi Men Chui Xue did not deny the conclusion.

"Because you don't want to take advantage of the situation?"

Xi Men Chui Xue did not deny this either.

"But this duel must go on."

"I'm willing to wait."

"Until my heart and mind calm down?"

Xi Men Chui Xue nodded: "I trust I shall not have to wait for too long."

Ye Gu Cheng suddenly looked up and stared at him. A grateful color seemed to appear within his gaze, but it was quickly dissipated by the gaze of the sword in his hand.

Feeling grateful towards your foe is also a fatal mistake.

"I won't make you wait long either. But while you wait, can I have a talk with someone?"

"Talking calms you down?"

"Only talking to one particular person can calm my heart and mind."

"Who?"

This was a question he did not need to ask.

Of course, Ye Gu Cheng was referring to Lu Xiao Feng, because only Lu Xiao Feng could possibly answer the questions boiling within him.

Lu Xiao Feng simply sat down, sat down atop the Forbidden City, upon

the glass tiles so slippery that one could barely keep one's footing.

The bright moon was behind him and framed his head, like the halo that shone forth from the head of the divine.

Ye Gu Cheng silently stared at him for a long time.

"You are not a god." He suddenly concluded.

"No, I'm not."

"So I just can't figure out how you came to know so many secrets."

Lu Xiao Feng smiled: "Did you really believe there are secrets in this world that nobody can figure out?"

"Maybe not, but this plan of ours...."

"Your conspiracy really was quite something, very meticulously planned. Pity no matter how careful and perfect a plan is, there are always miscalculations that leave clues.

"Where did we make our mistake? And how did you figure it out?"

Lu Xiao Feng answered in deep thought: "I really don't know exactly how I figured it out either. But I kept thinking that the people who should not have died were dying."

"Are you referring to Zhang Ying Feng, First Madame Gong Sun, and Ou Yang Qing?"

"And 'Mr. Big Shot Grandson of a Turtle'."

"Were you puzzled as to why someone would try to kill him?"

"Not anymore."

"Oh?"

"This conspiracy has been in the works for a long time. Manager Wang had been in contact with the people from the Southern Prince's palace for a long time too. And the place they chose to have their meetings was none other than the brothel where Ou Yang Qing works."

"Because they were certain that nobody would suspect eunuchs and lamas would be at a brothel."

{Translator's Note: This refers to events that happened in Chapter 4 of Book 1. Not to mention this sounds like the setup to a bad joke. So an eunuch and a lama walked into a brothel...(feel free to supply the punchline).}

"But you were not so certain. Because you knew that Big Shot Sun and Ou Yang Qing were not normal people, so you were always worried that they might have somehow figured out this conspiracy, so you had to kill

them to be sure."

"In truth, I didn't have to kill them."

"You really didn't."

"But this was too big of a deal for me to not take that risk."

"And it was precisely because of that, I knew there was a huge secret hidden behind this duel. And it could not have possibly just been because of Li Yan Bei and Old Man Du's bet."

Ye Gu Cheng sighed: "You should also know by now why Zhang Ying Feng had to die too."

"Because Zhang Ying Feng, desperate to find Xi Men Chui Xue, wandered into that eunuch nest and unwittingly discovered you were there as well. So he had to die."

"So you must know that the third wax figurine he made was of me."

"And because of that wax figurine, Clay Man Zhang died too."

"You were just a moment too late that day."

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"Because I wandered into quite a number of distractions along the way."

"I killed First Madame Gong Sun with the intentions of blaming it all on her."

"And you also wanted to shift my suspicions towards Honest Monk."

Ye Gu Cheng let out a cold laugh at the thought.

"Do you really truly believes he's all that honest?"

Lu Xiao Feng suddenly let out a little laugh in reply.

"I might often misjudge people, do the wrong things, or wander down the wrong paths, but sometimes those mistakes leads me straight to the answer."

"How so?"

"Had I not suspected Honest Monk, I would have never asked Ou Yang Qing, and would have never discovered that Manager Wang and the lamas of the Southern Prince's Palace were there on that day as well."

"Did you begin to suspect me when you discovered this?"

Lu Xiao Feng sighed.

"To be honest, I never suspected it was you. Even though I never believed that you could have been ambushed, and even more sure nobody in the Tang family could hurt you, I still never suspected you. Because...." He turned and stared into Ye Gu Cheng's eyes. "Because I had always thought that you were my friend."

Ye Gu Cheng looked away. Was it because he felt that he could no longer face Lu Xiao Feng?

"Using the bet between Li Yan Bei and Du Tong Xuan as a smoke screen and this duel as the reason, you planted a man alongside Du Tong Xuan who will act as your double." Lu Xiao Feng continued. "When you appeared, you were literally covered with flower petals, not because you were afraid that people could smell your festering wound, but because you were afraid that people would notice there was no odor."

Lu Xiao Feng sighed again: "Amazing plan, quite ingenious indeed."

Ye Gu Cheng did not turn around.

"But the most ingenious part was the satin belts."

"Oh?"

"Wei Zi Yun had intended to use the belts to limit the number of people from the martial world entering the Forbidden City. Yet you got Manager Wang to steal another bundle of the color shifting satin to make into a whole bunch of belts of your own and gave them to the Master of White

Cloud Outlook to distribute. Once more people showed up, Wei Zi Yun had no choice but to shift all security to the area surrounding the Hall of Supreme Harmony. That's why it was so easy for you to enter the Imperial Palace to carry out your conspiracy."

Ye Gu Cheng was staring up at the stars, not saying a word.

"Best laid plans. Even if you knew Xi Men Chui Xue would never fight an already wounded man, but you forgot about Tang Tian Zong, still set on avenging his brothers."

"Tang Tian Zong."

"If Tang Tian Zong hadn't suddenly ambushed of your double, my suspicions probably still would not have shifted to you."

"Oh?"

"When I discovered that secret, I immediately thought of the Southern Prince, and then Manager Wang. Only then did I fully comprehend your conspiracy, and how frightening of a conspiracy it really was."

Ye Gu Cheng suddenly broke into a laugh.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I shouldn't laugh?"

Gazing at him, Lu Xiao Feng slowly nodded: "As long as a man can still laugh, he should take every opportunity to laugh some more."

But there are many different kinds of laughter, some are joyous, some are forced, some are seductive, and some are bitter.

What kind of laughter was Ye Gu Cheng's?

It did not matter which kind of laughter it was, as long as he could still laugh, at this moment, at this place, then he was still an extraordinary hero.

Suddenly, he gave Lu Xiao Feng a pat on the shoulders: "I'm going now."

"You don't have anything more to say?"

Ye Gu Cheng paused.

"Only one more sentence."

"What is it?"

Ye Gu Cheng turned away.

"No matter what happens, you will always be my friend."

Looking at him walking away with assured steps towards Xi Men Chui Xue, Lu Xiao Feng suddenly noticed the autumn winds had turned freezing like the winds of dead winter...

By now, the moonlight had begun to fade, fade like the stars.

The stars faintly glittered like a dream, lovers' dream.

A lover will forever be the most adored. Sometimes, a person would be more adored than a lover, but those things happen very rarely.

Hatred is not an absolute emotion either, for within that hate, there might be found a certain amount empathy and respect.

Pity there are not too many nemesis who deserves love, and even less who deserves respect.

Resentment is different.

Hatred is for the past, but resentment is for the future. Hatred is passive, but resentment is active.

Could you say that Xi men Chui Xue hated Ye Gu Cheng? Could you say Ye Gu Cheng hated Xi Men Chui Xue.

There was no resentment between them, only hatred. A type of innate and instinctive, wonderful but foolish, foolish yet wonderful hatred.

Perhaps, what Ye Gu Cheng really hated was -- If there was already a Ye Gu Cheng, why must there be a Xi Men Chui Xue?

Maybe what Xi Men Chui Xue hated was the same.

Why must the distance between love and hate always be so difficult for people to measure?

But, at long last, the time for the duel has arrived.

Truly arrived. For at this moment, there was not a single person, not a single event, in this world and the next, that could stop this duel.

This moment might be fleeting, but for this fleeting moment, quite a number of people have already lost their everything.

Thinking about those people, Lu Xiao Feng suddenly felt an indescribable pinge of bitterness in his heart.

Was this duel worth it?

Was the wait worth it for those people?

Nobody could answer, nobody could explain, nobody could decide.

Not even Lu Xiao Feng.

But he also felt that pressing and menacing sword aura. But he might have felt more pressure than anybody else.

Because Xi Men Chui Xue was his friend, and so was Ye Gu Cheng.

--Once a person is thought of as a friend, then that person forever will be a friend.

That was why Lu Xiao Feng's gaze never left Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng's swords. He made careful and meticulous analysis to their every move, every glance, every expression, even every reflex of muscle.

He was afraid for Xi Men Chui Xue--

Xi Men Chui Xue's sword was a sword of a god, a god of swords. But at this moment, he was no longer a god, he was a man.

Because he has felt human love, human emotions.

Humans are weak and soft, and will always have weak points, will always be vulnerable, it is for this very reason that humans are really human.

Has Ye Gu Cheng already grasped Xi Men Chui Xue's weak point?

Lu Xiao Feng was afraid, for he knew it matters little how many weak points exist, for any one of them could be fatal.

For he knew, even if Ye Gu Cheng went easy Xi Men Chui Xue, Xi Men Chui Xue would never allow that for himself.

Victory means life, defeat means death. For people like Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng, there was no wiggle room at all to these absolutes.

But the strangest thing of all was that he was also afraid for Ye Gu Cheng.

He never felt Ye Gu Cheng had experienced human love or emotions.

Ye Gu Cheng's life was the sword, and the sword was Ye Gu Cheng's life. After all, life itself is a war full of various type of battles, big and small.

But no matter what kind of battle, there is usually just one goal--victory.

Victory meant glory, it meant honour.

But now, to Ye Gu Cheng, victory had lost its meaning. Because while defeat meant death to him, victory also meant death.

Because no matter if he wins or loses, he would never be able to get back the honour he had lost. And everybody knew there was no way he could leave the Forbidden City alive tonight.

So even though both men had reasons why he should win, both had factors saying he must lose.

In the end, who really wins and who really loses in this duel?

Moonlight and starlight faded even more as all the brilliance in the world concentrated and those two swords.

Two flawless and untarnishable swords.

Two unleashed swords!

The momentums were not very quick and the distance between Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng were still quite large.

Though their blades have not met, their moves had began to change. Though their bodies were moving quite slowly, their blades were moving extremely quick. For even before they exchanged one blow, their swords were already responding to each other.

To others, this duel did not look the least bit spectacular or impressive, but Wei Zi Yun, Ding Ao, Yin Xian, and Du Fang all have begun to sweat.

For all four were among the best swordsmen of this era, and could tell that this type of swordplay have reached the realm of absolute connection with the heart, the absolute pinnacle of martial arts.

Had his oppoent been anyone other than Xi Men Chui Xue, every change, every deception, every variation would have spelt certain death for his foe.

It was as if they had become one with their swords, as if they were moving the swords not with their arms or minds, but their hearts.

Suddenly, Lu Xiao Feng's fists were wet with cold sweat as well. For he suddenly realized that despite how quick his variation looked, Xi Men Chui Xue's moves were rather stiff and mannered; at least, they were not up to par the free flowing nature of Ye Gu Cheng's moves.

Ye Gu Cheng's sword were like a breeze on the outer edges of a cloud.

But Xi Men Chui Xue's sword felt almost as if there was an invisible thread tugging at its very tip - his wife, his family, his feelings - an invisible thread.

Lu Xiao Feng could also tell, in the next 20 variations or so, Ye Gu Cheng's sword would undoubtedly pierce Xi Men Chui Xue's throat.

At this speed, twenty variation passes in a blink of an eye.

Even Lu Xiao Feng's finger tips felt as cold as ice.

By now, nobody in the world could change Xi Men Chui Xue's fate, not Lu Xiao Feng, not even Xi Men Chui Xue himself.

The distance between the two men had closed to mere meters.

The two swords have been thrust out at full strength.

This was the final strike, the deciding strike.

It was only at this moment did Xi Men Chui Xue realize his strike was ever so slightly slow, by the time the tip of his sword touches Ye Gu Cheng's chest, Ye Gu Cheng's sword would surely have pierced through his own throat.

This fate was one that he could no long accept.

But he suddenly also discovered that Ye Gu Cheng's strike was slightly off target, maybe by no more than a centimeter or two, but that was the difference between life and death.

How could this error have happened?

Was it because Ye Gu Cheng knew that for him, there was no difference between life and death?

The blade of the sword is ice cold.

The ice cold blade of the sword pierced through Ye Gu Cheng's chest, he could almost feel the sword tip touching his heart.

Soon after, he felt a strange pain, like the pain he felt when he watched his first love die of sickness on her bed.

It was not just pain, but also horror, disappointment, and hopelessness.

Because he knew, everything joyous and beautiful in his life was about to end in this one instant.

But he felt no hatred towards Xi Men Chui Xue, only an unexplainable gratefulness.

For at this last instant, Xi Men Chui Xue's sword slowed down too. He was prepared to retract this fatal strike.

Ye Gu Cheng could tell.

He could tell that Xi Men Chui Xue did not want to kill him, but nevertheless did. For Xi Men Chui Xue knew that he wanted to die under this blade.

- If death is certain, then why not die under Xi Men Chui Xue's blade?
- To be able to die under Xi Men Chui Xue's blade is, at least, so much more honourable than dying under the blade of others.

Xi Men Chui Xue understood how he felt, so he granted his wish.

That was why he was grateful.

This was the kind understanding and empathy could only occur among the heroes of the world.

At that instant, the two men looked into each others eyes, and Ye Gu Cheng let out one final breath from the deepest regions of his heart.

"Thanks."

He never said that word, but his eyes said it all too clearly.

He knew that Xi Men Chui Xue would understand.

He fell.

The bright moon has disappeared, the stars have disappeared as well. Disappeared within the approaching dawn.

This peerless swordmaster finally fell.

But would his fame and honor disappear as well?

From of edge of the sky, a puff of white cloud floated over. Was it coming to carry his soul back to the outter heavens? Or did it come by to pay one last special respect to this unparalleled swordsman?

The dawn might be approaching, but the world felt even colder, even darker.

The color on Ye Gu Cheng's face was like the colors of the coming dawn: cold, lost, and mysterious.

There was still one last drop of blood on the sword.

Xi Men Chui Xue gently blew the blood off the tip of his sword and looked around at the world, the slow and unstirred world. A wave of unspeakable loneliness suddenly washed over him.

He put his sword away, bent over, and picked up Ye Gu Cheng's body. The sword was cold, the body was even colder.

But the coldest place of all was within Xi Men Chui Xue's heart.

The earth shattering duel had come and passed, and the foe who was even more worthy of respect than a friend had died under his blade.

Would there be anything in this world that stirs his heart once again?
Stirs his blood?

Has he decided to lay down his sword forever, just like he will lay down Ye Gu Cheng's body into his grave?

No matter what though, he could never allow anyone to disgrace either one of these two things.

Because the respect he felt for both were one and the same.

Suddenly, Ding Ao lunged forth and, sword in hand, blocked his path.

"You can't take him with you, dead or alive, you can't take him with you." He threatened.

Xi Men Chui Xue did not even seem to see him.

"This man is a guilty of high treason, thus those who pay homage and respect to him are guilty by association." Ding Ao continued.

"Are you going to stop me?" Xi Men Chui Xue asked point blank.

"Are you saying I can't?"

The veins on Xi Men Chui Xue's temple began to bulge out.

"Perhaps it is true that nothing in the world can Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng, but pity now Ye Gu Cheng is nothing more than a corpse now and there are still 3000 imperial guards alive and well here."

Ding Ao had just finished before he heard someone laughing behind him.

"Ye Gu Cheng might be dead, but Lu Xiao Feng is still alive and well too." The voice pointed out.

Lu Xiao Feng again.

Ding Ao snapped around: "What do you intend do?"

"I just want to merely remind you that both Xi Men Chui Xue and Ye Gu Cheng are friends of mine." Lu Xiao Feng matter-of-factly replied.

"Are you going to protect these traitors? Do you know what kind of crime that is in and of itself?"

"I know one thing for certain."

"And what's that?"

"I know that I would never do things I shouldn't do. But I don't care if I lose my head, I will go until the end to do the right thing."

Ding Ao's expression changed noticeably.

Du Fang and Yin Xian both arrived with the imperial guards. The bows were drawn, the sabres and swords have been unsheathed. Once again, everything was teetering on the knife's edge.

Suddenly, another man lunged forth.

"You guys might have 3000 imperial guards, but at least Lu Xiao Feng has one more friend, a friend who isn't afraid of losing his head either!" He shouted.

This man was none other than Bu Ju.

"This humble Taoist might have placed himself outside of the politics and society," the Wooden Taoist immediately followed, "but even those on the outside make friends on the outside."

He turned towards Honest Monk: "How about Buddhist monks?"

Honest Monk shot the Wooden Taoist a rather aggressive look: "If Taoist monks can have friends, why can't Buddhist monks have them?"

In the middle of answering, he turned and shot a similar look at Si Kong Zhai Xing.

"How about you?"

Si Kong Zhai Xing sighed rather ruefully.

"Not only are all the guards here master martial artists, but they are officials of law. I'm a mere thief, and you know the thing that thieves fear the most are officials. So..."

"So?" The Wooden Taoist asked.

"So I really don't want to admit Lu Xiao Feng is my friend, but pity I don't have a choice but to admit he is." Si Kong Zhai Xing replied with a exasperated laugh.

"Very good." The Wooden Taoist commented.

"Very bad." Si Kong Zhai Xing corrected.

"Bad?"

"If they want to keep Xi Men Chui Xue here, do you think Lu Xiao Feng would allow that?"

"Never."

"And if they were to go up against Lu Xiao Feng, do you think we would allow that?"

"Never."

"Then, by that logic, aren't we going to have to go up against them?"

The Wooden Taoist's silence admitted as much."

"So, I just did a quick calculation, if we were going to fight. Then each one of us would have to take down at least 317 of them."

He took a deep breath and continued: "The saying goes 'two fists can't beat four hands'. So I guess taking on 600 plus hands with my own two hands must not be a good feeling."

The Wooden Taoist suddenly broke out into a smile.

"Are you forgetting that you have 3 hands?"

Si Kong Zhai Xing smiled in response.

Their smiles were very relaxed. Here, in the shadows of the Son of Heaven, inside the Forbidden City, facing the glittering mountain of sabres and spears, they somehow was still able to look relaxed and at ease.

But Ding Ao and his martial brothers were beginning to get nervous, the guards were even more in awe of the task that might be facing them.

Should this fight occur, its carnage and repercussion would be unimaginable.

But it seemed as if this fight was destined to take place.

Wei Zi Yun's face was as grave as death. Fist clenched, he slowly began to speak: "Everyone here is a master that I have humbly admired for a long time. I dare not disrespect any of you, but duty...."

Lu Xiao Feng interrupted him.

"We appreciate your situation, but I hope you appreciate the temperament and disposition of people like us."

"Please continue."

"People like us, some are greedy, some are womanizing, some are avarice, and some are even quite cowardly. But when push comes to shove, at the crucial moment, we put friendship above everything else."

Wei Zi Yun pondered silently for a long time before letting out a sigh and nod: "I understand."

"I know you would."

"But there is one more thing you should appreciate."

"Oh?"

"The repercussion of this savage fight would undoubtedly be grave and crippling for both sides, on whose shoulders will the fault and the responsibility fall upon?"

Lu Xiao Feng did not reply. His heart just as heavy and Wei Zi Yun.

Wei Zi Yun's eyes scanned around at the situation surrounding him. He sighed tiredly.

"No matter who the responsibility falls upon, looks like this battle can't be stopped by anything or anyone."

"Maybe there is still one person who could." Lu Xiao Feng hesitated before slowly answering.

"Who?"

With a strange expression on his face, Lu Xiao Feng stared far into the distance, into the depth of the Forbidden City.

At this precise moment, someone in the great hall beneath them shouted: "Imperial Edict!"

An eunuch, dressed in yellow, scroll in hand, hurriedly came scampering this way.

There, atop of the very spine of the great hall, everybody kneeled in preparation for the reading of the edict.

"By the Mandate of Heaven, the Son of Heaven decrees. Summons Lu Xiao Feng to the South Library. All other non-palace personnel are to leave the Forbidden City immediately."

The infallible words of the Son of Heaven cannot be defied.

All other non-palace personnel, of course also includes the dead. Thus before this battle even occurred, it was resolved.

Epilogue

September 16th. Dusk. The moon was about to rise once more. This night's moon would surely be even rounder than that of the 15th.

Si Kong Zhai Xing had walked up and down the entire length of the Inner Golden Water River in the yard. He had meant to count, once and for all, the total number of railings on either side of the river, but he always lost count. He had something else on his mind-

Why has Lu Xiao Feng still not come out?

What was the Emperor keeping him for?

"Circa Regna Tonat" Having a laid back and carefree person like Lu Xiao Feng at the Emperor's side was just asking for trouble. One misspoken word, one mistaken action, and he would be hard pressed to keep his head.

{Translator's note: I figured I throw in some extra cultural reference. The phrase "Circa Regna Tonat", Latin for "around the throne, the thunder roars," was written by Thomas Wyatt as he watched Henry VIII kill Anne Boleyn.}

This point did not just make Si Kong Zhai Xing worry, but all of Lu Xiao Feng's friends. Lu Xiao Feng had quite alot of friends.

Wei Zi Yun had gone in to check the situation many times, but nothing seemed to be happening inside the South Library.

Without summons, nobody dared to enter the South Library on his own, even Wei Zi Yun. Every time he came back out without any news, everyone worried that much more.

So by the 6th time he came out, some people were practically jumping out of their own skin with worry. But this time, Wei Zi Yun did not seem as upset or disappointed as before. Instead his eyes seemed aglow.

Seeing the look in his eye, Si Kong Zhai Xing immediately ran over to his side: "Do you have any news?"

Wei Zi Yun simply nodded.

"Has little bastard come out of there?"

Wei Zi Yun shook his head.

"Did you see him?"

Once again, Wei Zi Yun shook his head.

"In what world does this qualify as news?" Si Kong Zhai Xing was practically shouting at this point.

"I might not have seen him, but I did hear his voice."

"Voice? What type of voice."

"Laughter, of course."

Wei Zi Yun paused and began to laugh himself as well. "Other than laughter, have you ever heard his voice in do anything else?"

Si Kong Zhai Xing's eyes were huge at this point.

"Was the laughter really loud?"

"I trust you know much better than I what his laughter sounds like."

Si Kong Zhai Xing's eyes got even bigger.

"In front of the Emperor, he was still laughing as usual?"

"Do you think there is anything left in this world this guy isn't capable of?"

"No, I really can't." Si Kong Zhai Xing sighed.

"Neither can I."

"What's even more puzzling for me though, is what made him laugh so hard in the South Library."

"I hear they are having a drink. "Wei Zi Yun whispered.

"Who are they?"

"They are none other than the Emperor and Lu Xiao Feng." Wei Zi Yun's whisper was even quieter.

By now, Si Kong Zhai Xing's eyes looked like they were about to jump out of their sockets.

"Where did you hear this from?"

"When I went in, I just so happened to run into a young eunuch in the middle of taking some wine inside."

"And you asked him to take a look at what was going on inside while he's at it?"

Wei Zi Yun sighed.

"I had to promise to buy him an house outside the palace before he said ok."

"So what did he hear?"

"He only heard one sentence."

"A house for one sentence? Quite an expensive price on that sentence don't you think?"

"No, not expensive at all."

"Not expensive?"

"That single sentence might be worth more than a whole myriad of houses."

He was truly quite something else at holding his calm. Even at this point, he was still unwilling to just say what that sentence was straight out.

But Si Kong Zhai Xing's was frustrated to the point where steam seemed to be emanating from his head.

"So who the hell said that sentence? What the hell was that sentence anyhow?" He was beginning to lose it.

"His Majesty the Emperor said that sentence, and he promised Lu Xiao Feng one thing."

"What?"

"Whatever he wants."

"So whatever Lu Xiao Feng wants, the Emperor has promised to give him?"

"The Son of Heaven does not utter words he does not mean. And there is absolutely nothing in this world that the Son of Heaven cannot do."

Si Kong Zhai Xing was dumbfounded, truly dumbfounded.

During this entire conversation, he might have been the only one asking the questions, but he was by no means the only one listening to the answers. At this point, everyone was dumbfounded.

To everyday world and people, the words of the Son of Heaven was literally like the magical wand of those legendary demons or gods. They could turn iron into gold, turn the poor and despisable to the rich and famous, turn the backward and barbaric to the future and vanguard. The silence seemed to drag on forever until Si Kong Zhai Xing finally broke it with a huge sigh.

"So what did that little bastard ask for?"

"I don't know, the little eunuch only heard that one sentence."

"Actually, I don't need to ask to know what that little bastard asked for."

"Oh?"

"Within the Forbidden City, there must be all kinds of rare and delicious wine."

"So you think he'll ask for wine?"

"Are there people who don't want to live?"

"Even if there are, there aren't many of them."

"Well, wine is that little bastard's life, what would he want if not wine?"

"His livelihood!" Honest Monk suddenly pipped up.

"His livelihood?" Si Kong Zhai Xing did not understand.

"Wine might be his life, but women are his livelihood." Honest Monk observed.

"So you think he asked the Emperor to grant him a woman?" The Wooden Taoist queried.

"Maybe not one, maybe three hundred sixty five!"

The Wooden Taoist burst out with laughter.

"So this is what the Buddhist Monk thinks? This monk must have gone crazy thinking about women. We must not use monk logic to guess what Lu Xiao Feng feels or wants."

{Translator's note: Honest Monk is a dirty dirty monk.}

"So what does the Taoist think?" Honest Monk demanded.

"That little bastard might be a slave to both wine and women, but he's not an idiot. He should realize as long as he has money, he'll never be short of either wine or women. Not to mention his uncontrolled spending habit always leaves him want of money."

Honest Monk sighed.

"No wonder people say: 'the older you get the greedier you get'. The old Taoist here is a miser, a moneygrubber!"

Bu Ju had been wanting to speak up since the beginning and finally could not hold back any longer. "If I were him. I would surely ask the Emperor to make me a Marshall of the Empire. So I can lead armies to the west to conquer in the name of the Emperor and the Empire. To make my name known throughout the world and history."

Wei Zi Yun immediately agreed with this guess.

Fame, fortune, women, power, are they not all a man fantasizes about?

Other than these, what could he possibly ask for?

"Maybe what he asked for wasn't just one thing." Si Kong Zhai Xing suddenly suggested. "That little bastard's heart has always been quite black."

"No matter what though, the thing he asked for must have been one of the things we guessed." Honest Monk concluded.

"Wrong." A voice suddenly replied from beneath the Gate of Everlasting Calm.

{Translator's note: This is another instance where I think Gu Long has got his geography wrong. The Gate of Everlasting Calm, or Yongdingmen, is/was the front gate to the city of Beijing itself. I highly doubt the Emperor not only kicked those men out of the Forbidden City, but the entire city of Beijing as well.}

A man walked forth from within the gate, a proud and positively glowing man -- Lu Xiao Feng had finally reappeared. Immediately, everyone ran over to his side.

"Did all of us get it wrong?"

Lu Xiao Feng nodded.

"So what did you ask for?" Honest Monk demanded.

"I can't tell you, I just can't."

He parted the gathering of men in front of him and began walking away. No matter what the people around him said, he refused to open his mouth.

He seemed to have his heart set on killing these men with suspense.

Pity, for these men were not the type who gave up that easily. As Lu Xiao Feng walked along in big, casual steps, they followed closely behind.

Honest Monk gave Si Kong Zhai Xing's sleeve a little tug to get his attention.

"You are this little bastard's nemesis, if there was one person in the world who can make him talk, it's you." He whispered.

Si Kong Zhai Xing batted his eyes a couple of times.

"Damn right!" He answered as he casually strode up to Lu Xiao Feng and gave his sleeve a little tug to get his attention.

"Are you sure you don't want to tell?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"Why is that good?"

"Because if you don't tell, then I will... I will...."

He whispered a couple words into Lu Xiao Feng's ear. Lu Xiao Feng's foot steps came to a sudden halt as he stood there, dumbfounded for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, he let out a long sigh and whispered a couple of words into Si Kong Zhai Xing's ear.

Si Kong Zhai Xing was immediately dumbstruck. His expression looking like he had just, simultaneously, swallowed whole 3 chicken eggs, 2 duck eggs, and 4 very large steamed buns.

Lu Xiao Feng resumed his old leisure pace.

Si Kong Zhai Xing blanked followed and resumed walking as well. But within the first step, he began to laugh, laugh uncontrollably, laugh to the point of tears.

Honest Monk tugged at his sleeves again.

"So what did he tell you?"

Still unable to stop laughing, Si Kong Zhai Xing shook his head and replied between bouts of laughter: "I can't tell you, I just can't."

"Don't you forget who was the one who told you to go ask him? Besides,

if you don't tell me, then I will...."

He also whispered a couple of words into Si Kong Zhai Xing's ear.

Si Kong Zhai Xing's foot steps also came to immediate halt as he stood there, dumbfounded for what seemed like another eternity before finally whispering something into Honest Monk's ear.

Honest Monk was dumbstruck as well. Then he began to laugh too, laugh uncontrollably, laughing as if Buddha himself suddenly appeared and granted him three big nuns, two small nuns, and four not-so-big-and-not-so-small-but-just-right nuns.

{Translator's note: Like I said, the Honest Monk is a dirty dirty man.}

There after, the Wooden Taoist forced him to tell him as well, then Wei Zi Yun got the information from the Wooden Taoist. Eventually, Ding Ao, Du Fang, Yin Xian, and Bu Ju all knew.

Then everyone began to laugh, laugh uncontrollably...

September 16th. Night. The moonlight shone from the edge of the Heavens like pure water. Lu Xiao Feng walked assuredly along the moonlit bridge that was glowing like ice, full of energy and life, absolutely certain of himself and his purpose.

He was not laughing. But behind him everybody was laughing, laughing uncontrollably. Laughing so hard that they were either doubled over or leaning back in laughter. Laughing like a group of little children.

Still laughing, they made their way off the bridge and onto the street glittering in the lamp light. Everywhere they walk, by their side on the streets, out of the windows of their houses, from the front doors of their shops, people gawked at them in shock. None of them could ever possibly imagine that these men were all the greatest martial arts masters of their era. And none of them could ever possibly guess why they were laughing so heartily, absolutely none. Maybe nobody ever will....

Lu Xiaofeng Book 4: Silver Hook Casino Alley

[银钩赌坊 Yingou Dufang]

A Gu Long's work

Translated by Foxs

Edited by Eliza Bennet

Chapter 1 – The Night of Saving-a-Beauty Kindness

Autumn night. End of autumn.

The dark and long alley was quiet and lonesome; there was only one solitary lamp.

The old and worn out white lantern had turned almost grey, it hung slanting above a narrow door at the very end of the long alley. Dangling below the lantern was a shiny silver hook, an ordinary hook, just like the one used by an old fisherman.

The silver hook kept swaying in the autumn wind. The autumn wind seemed to sigh, sighing over why would there be so many people in this world who were willing to let themselves being caught by this silver hook?

From the damp, gloomy and cold fog Fang Yufei entered the brilliantly illuminated Silver Hook Casino. Taking off his dark colored cloak, he revealed an extremely well-fitting, specially tailored, exquisite silver-colored satin garment.

Every day, he was happiest around this time, especially today.

Because Lu Xiaofeng was standing right next to him. Lu Xiaofeng had always been a friend he was most fond of, a friend he respected the most.

Lu Xiaofeng was also in very high spirits, just because he was Lu Xiaofeng.

The luxuriously decorated hall was brimming with warmth and gaiety. The aroma of wine mixed with the fragrance of high-quality cosmetics; the intermittent jingling of silver coins was pleasant to the ears, no music in this world was more melodious than this kind of noise.

He liked to hear this kind of noise, just like the majority of people in the world, he also liked luxury and enjoyed life to the fullest.

But actually, the Silver Hook Casino was a very luxurious place. At any time you would find all kinds of extravagant people, prepared to enjoy all kinds of extravagant enjoyments.

And the most extravagant enjoyment naturally was the gambling.

Everybody was gambling, everybody's concentration was on their stakes on the gambling table, but when Lu Xiaofeng and Fang Yufei walked in, everybody could not help but raised their heads to look.

Some people were indeed like a magnet among a bunch of nails. Lu Xiaofeng and Fang Yufei were undoubtedly this kind of people.

"Who in the world are these two exceptional young men?"

"The one in silver satin garment is the brother-in-law of this gambling establishment's big boss." The one answering was a wiry thin man, a typical true gambler.

"Are you saying he is the younger brother of Blue Beard's new wife?"

"Her flesh and blood younger brother!"

"Isn't he the Silver Sparrowhawk Fang Yufei?"

"The one and only."

"They say he is a very famous playboy, proficient in eating, drinking, women and gambling; his qinggong was not bad."

"That's why a lot of people say that he is a 'flower picking bandit'!" the true gambler said with a laugh, "Actually, if he wants a girl, he only needs to do is just beckon with his finger, there is no need for him to go 'pick flower' in the middle of the night."

"I heard his sister, Fang Yuxiang is also a very well-known pretty woman."

"More beautiful than flower, more exquisite than jade," another man sighed with his eyes closed, "That woman simply cannot be described with these two words, 'pretty woman'; she is simply 'the-cause-of-downfall-of-a-nation' kind of rarity!"

"Who's that young fellow next to Fang Yufei? How come his eyebrows slant down just like his moustache?"

"If I am not mistaken, he must be that Four-eyebrow Lu Xiaofeng!"

Lu Xiaofeng.

Some people have become legendary characters when they are still alive. Without a doubt, Lu Xiaofeng was this kind of person.

At the mention of his name, everybody's gaze was immediately fixed on him, except for one person.

This person was, unexpectedly, a woman.

She was wearing light-as-a-feather, soft silk gown in apple green. So soft that it looked like a second layer of skin hugging her slender and mature body. Her skin was as delicate and smooth as a white jade; sometimes it almost looked translucent, just like an ice statue. Her beautiful face was completely devoid of any makeup. Her pair of clear and bright eyes was the best decoration any woman would dream of in vain. The corner of her eyes did not even look at Lu Xiaofeng, but with all his heart and soul, Lu Xiaofeng's stare was fixated on her.

Fang Yufei laughed and shook his head, "There are at least seven, eight good-looking women in this room, why do you have to look at her?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because she is ignoring me."

Fang Yufei laughed, "Do you think that all women will kneel down and kiss your foot as soon as they see you?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, "At the very least she should give me a glance. I am not the very least the most ugly man."

Fang Yufei: "If you want to look at her, it is best if you keep your distance."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why?"

Lowering his voice, Fang Yufei said, "This woman is an iceberg, if you want to move her, be careful, your hand will catch frostbite!"

Lu Xiaofeng also smiled.

But as he smiled, he walked straight toward the iceberg. No matter how many high mountain ridges he had climbed, right now he only wanted to climb this iceberg.

This iceberg smelled good. It was definitely not the fragrance of the perfume, it was not even the aroma of the wine. Some women were just like fresh flowers; not only were they beautiful, they even radiate fresh fragrance. Undoubtedly, she was this kind of woman.

Right now Lu Xiaofeng was like a honeybee; as he smelled the flower fragrance, he wanted to fly and land on the stamen of this flower.

Fortunately he was not drunk yet; he stopped right behind her.

The iceberg did not turn her head. In her beautiful and delicate hands she was holding some chips. She was pondering whether she should place her bet on 'big'? Or should she place it on 'small'?

The dealer started to roll the dice, and then 'Bang!' he slapped the dice box on the table. "Place your bet, now!" he shouted.

The iceberg was still thinking. Lu Xiaofeng blinked and with an exaggerated movement he stepped closer and softly whispered on her ear, "This time you should bet on 'small'."

Immediately the delicate hand placed the chips down, but she placed her bet on 'big'.

"Open!"

As the dice box was opened, the number of dots on three dice amount to only 'seven'.

"Seven dots, small! Eat 'big', pay up 'small'."

The iceberg's countenance paled. She turned her head around and shot Lu Xiaofeng a malicious look then she turned and walked away.

Lu Xiaofeng could only force a bitter smile.

Some women were born with a rebellious character in their blood; particularly rebellious against men. Lu Xiaofeng should have thought that

she might be this kind of woman.

The iceberg had already walked through the crowd toward the door. As she walked, she maintained a peculiarly graceful bearing.

"There won't be one woman of this temperament among a hundred thousand; it will be a pity to miss her. If you don't pursue her, you will regret it!" Lu Xiaofeng was admonishing himself in his heart.

He was always a man who listened to his own advice, therefore, he immediately walked after her.

Fang Yufei met him and slowly said, "Must you really climb this iceberg?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I am not afraid of frostbite."

Fang Yufei patted his shoulder, "But you must be careful nonetheless; icebergs are very slippery, you might slip down and fall."

Lu Xiaofeng: "How many times have you slipped down and fall?"

Fang Yufei smiled. Of course it was a forced smile. It was not until Lu Xiaofeng had walked out the door did he mutter to himself, "Falling down from this iceberg, at the most, you can only fall down once, because this one time you will plunge yourself to your death."

The dark long alley was still dark. The night had been very deep. The

carriages and horses were parked outside the alley. It did not matter what kind of people, whoever wanted to visit the Silver Hook Casino must walk through this dark alley. This had made the Silver Hook Casino several degrees more mysterious and wasn't it mystery which has always been most appealing to human beings since time immemorial?

The silver hook was still swaying in the wind. Perhaps the number of people hooked by this silver hook was a hundred times higher than the number of fish caught by the old fisherman.

The night was desolate, the lantern grew dim.

The iceberg walked in front, a dull green cloak was added to the number of clothes she was wearing.

Lu Xiaofeng followed behind her. The dull green cloak rose and fell gently under the dim lantern light. He was like a lovely little child who chases after floating clouds in his dream.

There was nobody else in that dark alley; the alley was very long.

Suddenly the iceberg turned around and stared at Lu Xiaofeng. Her pair of eyes seemed colder than the autumn star.

Lu Xiaofeng had no choice but halt his steps; he looked at her and smiled.

"Why are you following me?" the iceberg suddenly said.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "I have made you lose some money, I feel very bad in my heart; and so ..."

"And so you want to compensate me?" the iceberg said.

Lu Xiaofeng nodded immediately.

Iceberg: "And how do think you will compensate me?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I know a diner in the city for night-time snacks, they are open all night, the food and wine are not bad at all. The night is now very deep, you must be a little bit hungry!"

The iceberg rolled her eyes. "That's not a good idea. I have an even better one."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What is it?"

Unexpectedly, the iceberg smiled. "Come closer, I'll tell you."

Of course Lu Xiaofeng came closer.

He did not expect there would be time when this iceberg would melt, which made him not able to think. Suddenly a blow landed on the left side of his face, followed by another blow on the right side of his face.

The iceberg's hand was truly fast; not only it was fast, it was heavy too.

Perhaps Lu Xiaofeng deliberately did not evade, perhaps he did not expect she would slap him this hard. Whatever it was, he had indeed suffered two palm strikes, and was speechless.

The iceberg laughed again, but this time it was a cold laugh, colder than ice. "I have seen too many men just like you, men like flies and stinky bugs, always make me want to puke."

When she turned around to leave this time, Lu Xiaofeng had no way of following her even if his face were thicker; he could only look helplessly as this beautiful cloud floated away from him.

The alley was very long, her walking speed was not fast at all. Suddenly from the darkness appeared four men; two men twisted her hands, the other two grabbed her legs.

She cried out in fear and tried to slap these men several times, but it was too bad that these men were unlike Lu Xiaofeng who had compassion toward the fragrant and would yield to the jade; who would head-over-heels place her on a pedestal.

Lu Xiaofeng's face was still hurt, actually, he did not want to get involved in the commotion. It was a pity that his inborn character was one who loves to meddle in other people's business. To see four men bully one woman in front of him was simply too difficult for him to bear.

The four men had just finished their business when they discovered

that a man whose moustache looked just like his eyebrows suddenly appear in front of them and coldly said, "First, release her, then crawl out of here. Whoever does not obey, I will break his nose."

These men were definitely not the obedient type, but when two of them were really hit until their noses were crooked, the disobedient became obedient. Thereupon four men meekly dropped down on their knees and crawled along the alley. Blood was dripping down on the ground from the two men's noses!

Afterwards, whenever anybody would ask them, "Why is your nose crooked?"

Their answer would be, "I don't know." They really did not know, simply because they could not see clearly how Lu Xiaofeng made his move.

By this time the iceberg seemed to start melting; she had turned soft because some people had just given her a fright, so much so that she asked for help from Lu Xiaofeng, "I live nearby. Can you walk me home?"

Her home was definitely not near, but Lu Xiaofeng did not complain; in fact, he was hoping that she lived as far away as possible. Because along the way she collapsed into Lu Xiaofeng's bosom, as if she was too weak to sit up straight by herself. Luckily the carriage's shutters were closed, the curtain was very thick.

The carriage went on for almost an hour, yet so far they only exchanged a few words.

"I am not a fly, I am also not a bedbug; I am surnamed Lu, called Lu Xiaofeng." It was only natural that he would be the one who had to strike

the conversation.

The iceberg smiled. This time it was a real smile. "I am surnamed Leng [cold], called Leng Ruoshuang [lit. as cold as frost]."

Lu Xiaofeng also smiled; he thought the name fit her very well.

"Do you know those four men?"

Leng Ruoshuang shook her head.

"Why did they bully you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Leng Ruoshuang started to open her mouth, but then she blushed and hung her head.

Lu Xiaofeng did not ask anymore. Men bully women, sometimes they do not need any reason. Much less a young woman like her, whose look could move men's hearts, herself was a very good reason, enough to have many men to want to 'bully' her.

The carriage did not go fast at all, the compartment was very comfortable. Sitting inside was probably as comfortable as sleeping in the cradle.

The fragrance coming out from Leng Ruoshuang's body smelled like orchid, or perhaps smelled like the sweet-scented osmanthus; simple, elegant, and enchanting. Even if this carriage had to go for three days

and nights, Lu Xiaofeng would not have any reason to complain that the journey was too long.

Suddenly Leng Ruoshuang said, "My house is at the Yongle Lane, right next to the first house on the left."

[Note: Yongle was the reign name of the third Ming Emperor Chengzu; which leads me to believe that this story happened during the Ming Dynasty.]

Lu Xiaofeng: "Where is Yongle Lane?"

Leng Ruoshuang: "We passed it just a moment ago!"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "But you ..."

Leng Ruoshuang: "I did not order this carriage to stop, because I don't want to go home tonight!"

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng felt his heart was beating two, three times faster than usual.

If there is a girl like her leaning by your side, telling you that she does not want to go home tonight, I guarantee that your heart will be beating faster than Lu Xiaofeng's.

Leng Ruoshuang said, "I have suffered a losing streak tonight, I am thinking of going to a different casino and turn my luck."

Lu Xiaofeng's heart turned cold instantly. Since a long time ago he had repeatedly warned himself never to be conceited, but it was a weakness that just would not go away.

Actually, how many men have the ability to overcome this weakness?

Leng Ruoshuang: "Do you know that there is a place called Golden Hook Casino around here?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not know; he had not even heard about this place.

Leng Ruoshuang: "You are not from around here, of course you do not know!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "That place is a secret?"

Leng Ruoshuang's clear eyes cast him a glance. "Do you have other matter to attend tonight?" she suddenly asked.

The answer of course was, "No."

Leng Ruoshuang: "Do you want me to take you there and take a look?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I do!"

Leng Ruoshuang said, "But I have promised the Boss there not to take

any stranger in. If you really want to go, you must agree to my condition."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Tell me."

Leng Ruoshuang: "You must let me cover your eyes, and you must promise not to peek."

Lu Xiaofeng did want to go to begin with, now he wanted to go even more. His natural character was very curious, he always liked the excitement this kind of mystery brings. Therefore, without even thinking, he immediately said, "I promise."

Staring at the light gauze gown she was wearing, which was as thin as cicada's wings, he smiled and said, "You'd better use a thicker cloth to cover my eyes. Sometimes my eyes can see through the cover."

What is darkness?

If days and nights, year after year, month after month, one has to be in an infinite darkness, how would his heart feel?

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng remembered Hua Manlou. He thought that although the Heaven had bestowed upon him such a cruel suffering, not only Hua Manlou did not utter a single complain, toward all mankind and all creatures he was still brimming with kindness, compassion and love.

To reach this point was not easy at all.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed; his eyes were covered but a short moment, but he had already felt it was unbearable.

The carriage seemed to go through a night market then passed through running water. He heard voices like the noise of running water.

Now the carriage stopped. Leng Ruoshuang pulled his hand and softly said, "Walk slowly, follow me. I guarantee this place will not disappoint you."

Her hand was slender and smooth.

Now it felt like they were walking downward. The wind transmitted the sound of night creatures, obviously they were in the wilderness. Then Lu Xiaofeng heard knocks on door, and the sound of a door opening.

Entering the room, it felt like they were walking along a corridor; the corridor was not very long. At the other end of the corridor, he vaguely heard the noise of people talking and shouting, the sound of dice falling into the bowl, silver coins jingling on the table, and the laughter of both men and women.

Leng Ruoshuang: "We're here!"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed in relief: "Thank heavens!"

Another knock on a door ahead, and then the door opened. The noise inside got louder and clearer as the door opened.

Leng Ruoshuang pulled his hand to enter the door, and softly said, "Stand and wait here, I am going to get the Boss to come over."

When she let his hand go, the intoxicating fragrance also left him, going farther and farther away. Suddenly there was a loud 'Bang!', someone slammed the door shut. The sound of people, the laughter, the dice, everything disappeared as if by magic. All around him was nothing but silence, as if the world suddenly turned dead.

Lu Xiaofeng felt as if he had just fallen from the bustling place into the grave. What was it all about?

"Miss Leng, Leng Ruoshuang!"

He could not help but calling out, but no answer came. Could it be that so many people in the room suddenly had their mouths stitched shut?

Finally Lu Xiaofeng took off the cloth covering his eyes. Then his whole body turned cold. The room was empty, not even one human being was there. Where did all those people go?

It was absolutely impossible for all of them to go out the room together in just a split second like that.

This kind of absolute impossibility, how did it happen?

The room was not too big. There was a bed and a table. There was food

and wine on the table. The food and wine was fresh.

Lu Xiaofeng could not stop goose bumps from appearing on his whole body. He suddenly realized that it was impossible for this room to house that many people.

As a matter of fact, anybody could see that there was no one else in the room; not now, not then.

But Lu Xiaofeng clearly heard voices of many people just a moment ago.

If he believed his eyes, then he could not believe his ears. But his ears had always been keen, he had never had any hearing problem. What was it all about?

If the room was indeed empty, yet it was even more impossible for it to produce all kinds of noise without anybody inside.

But this kind of impossibility did indeed happen, not only that, it happened to Lu Xiaofeng.

Could it be that this was a haunted house?

Could it be that the Heaven felt that Lu Xiaofeng had not met enough strange affairs, that this time he had to meet a ghost?

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

He decided that since he could not penetrate this mystery anyway, he might as well try to find a way out before giving this matter further consideration.

But he could not go out.

This room did not have any window. The four walls and the door were all made of several cun [unit of length, equivalent to approximately 1 inch] thick of iron panels.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed again.

Whenever he met a dead end, he would always laugh. He always thought that among his limited number of good traits, his ability to laugh was one of them. Laughing not only can make other people happy, it can also help oneself to relax.

But how could he relax right now?

Of the four dishes on the table, one was pine nut chicken rice (?), one was crab cake in thick sauce, one was goose feet salad, and the other was a dish of hotplate. Not only these dishes were exquisitely prepared, they were also Lu Xiaofeng's favorite dishes.

It seemed like whoever set this trap was very familiar with Lu Xiaofeng's day-to-day habits and what he liked.

The wine was Jiangnan's aged Young Maiden's Blush. The pot was still sealed. There was a piece of paper pressed down by the pot:

'Sire is invited to drink a cup of wine. This message was prepared by Sire's old friend.'

This 'old friend' must be indeed his friend, for only someone who had known him for a long time would understand him well.

But Lu Xiaofeng could not remember who among his old friends would fix this for him.

On the margin there were two more rows of very delicate writings:

'Sire may stay for three days and have a little rest in here. After three days, I will promptly come again.'

Although there was no signature on the bottom, it was obvious that this message was written by that iceberg, Leng Ruoshuang.

It seemed like she had already predicted that Lu Xiaofeng would certainly fall into this trick.

So they had prepared such a deliberate and intricate trick, just to detain Lu Xiaofeng in here for three days?

Lu Xiaofeng did not believe it, yet he could not guess what other motive they have. Therefore, he sat down, picked up the chopstick, took the hotplate and shoved it into his mouth.

The chopsticks were silver, so there was no poison in the food. Obviously they also knew that it was not that easy to kill Lu Xiaofeng by poison.

Thereupon Lu Xiaofeng picked up the wine pot and patted the seal with his palm. Suddenly 'Pop!' a whiff of green smoke puffed out from the clay seal, followed by 'Crash!' the wine pot fell down to the floor and broke.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at the wine spilled on the floor. He wanted to laugh, but he couldn't. He passed out.

The fog had dispersed, the stars filled the sky, the wind transmitted the intermittent cry of cicadas, the soil had been moistened by the dew. Lu Xiaofeng's clothes were entirely soaked.

Incidentally, when he woke up, he saw streaks of white on the dark blue sky toward the eastern horizon. When he woke up, the earth also woke up.

When he stood up, the gray and dark far-away mountain had already turned dark green. The air also carried the delicate fragrance of the distant woods.

There were smokes coming out from chimneys all over the hill, but he did not see any farmhouses around him. If this was the place where he alighted from the carriage last night, where was the iron-paneled house? If it was not the place he went last night, how did he come to this place?

With great trouble those people set up a trap and deceived him, just so

that they could take him to spend the night in this open wilderness?

It was harder for Lu Xiaofeng to believe, but he was not able to tell if they had any other motive.

Therefore, he took off his drenched coat, slung it over his shoulder, and started to stride back to the city.

He was staying at the Five Blessing Inn within the city wall. Right now he was thinking of taking a hot bath, eat some breakfast, take a nap, and only then will he give this impenetrable puzzle a thought.

The Five Blessing Inn's meat-stuffed steamed bun was very good, the chicken noodle soup was also very good, and the bed sheet was probably changed only yesterday.

Off in the distance he saw the golden lettering of the Five Blessing Inn's signboard; very soon he would forget the unpleasant experience he had just gone through, because all kinds of pleasant things were waiting for him in there.

Who would have thought that the things that were waiting for him were two swords, four sabers, seven spears with red tassels, and a string of shackle chain?

As soon as he stepped over the gate, he heard a shout and thirteen men surrounded him in the middle, followed by a clanking noise as the iron chain was wrapped around his neck.

The chain was thick and heavy, the person wrapping it around his neck was very deft; obviously he was very proficient in using the chain.

Lu Xiaofeng immediately stretched out his two fingers and pinched; a string of iron chain instantly clamped down into two strings of chain. 'Ding!' half of the chain fell down to the ground.

The man holding the other half of the chain was shaken that his knees buckled and he was pushed several steps back. His countenance turned green from the fright. Pointing one shaky finger to Lu Xiaofeng, he stammered, "You ... you dare to resist arrest?"

"Resist arrest?"

Lu Xiaofeng looked around and noticed that these people were wearing red tasseled cap. He frowned, "Are you from the Yamen [government office in feudal China]?"

The man nodded. Someone on the side shouted, "This is Chief Yang of the police department. You dare to resist arrest; that means you are rebelling."

Lu Xiaofeng: "You are here to arrest me? What crime have I committed?"

Chief Yang sneered, "Do not rub sand on clear eyes, do not tell lies in front of a Sage. Witness and material evidence are all here, and you are still playing dumb?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Where is the witness? Where is the evidence?"

There were seven, eight people sitting behind the counter; although they all dressed handsomely, their countenances were very unsightly. One after another they pointed their fingers to Lu Xiaofeng and shouted in succession: "It's him!" "Last night it was this evil thief with four eyebrows on his face who raped my wife."

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbfounded.

In a stern voice Chief Yang said, "Last night, in just one night you have committed eight major crimes. These people are the witnesses."

Another man in red-tasseled cap pointed toward a pile of bundles behind the counter: "Those were found in your room. That is the evidence."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed: "If I really stole people's belongings, would I store everything in my room? Do I look that stupid to you?"

"Just listen to you," Chief Yang said with a cold laugh, "Are you saying that someone else robbed these many things and simply deliver them all to you? Perhaps you are his beloved ancestor?"

Lu Xiaofeng was not able to refute.

Suddenly someone coldly said, "Killing, plundering, and raping women, all are trivial matters. As long as we do not care, the criminal would be beyond the law."

There was a square table on the far side corner, on the table was a dish of vegetable and a pot of wine. There were three old men, wearing very dark green embroidered robes, with tall hats adorned in white jade and yellow gold, sitting around the table gloomily. Two were drinking tea, the other was drinking wine.

The man talking was the one drinking wine. Isn't it true that those who drink wine are always more talkative than those who don't?

Lu Xiaofeng laughed again: "Killing, plundering, and raping women, all are trivial matters? Then what matter is important?"

The old man drinking wine turned around and looked at him. His eyes shot a piercing gaze as he stared at Lu Xiaofeng. "It doesn't matter what trivial matters you did, you shouldn't have provoked us," he said coldly.

Lu Xiaofeng: "What religious organization do you belong to?"

The old man in green: "You don't recognize us?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I don't."

The old man in green picked the wine cup, he brought it to his mouth and slowly sipped the wine. The hand holding the cup was thin and withered like a crow's claw, with finger nails about four, five cun long; very dark green finger nails.

Lu Xiaofeng acted as if he did not see.

The old man in green: "Do you recognize us now?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I don't."

The old man in green let out a cold laugh and slowly stood up. Everybody could see that the picture embroidered on the chest of his clothes was a face, its eyebrows clear and its eyes elegant, the face was graceful, like one belonged to an outstandingly beautiful young woman. But when he had stood straight, everybody could see that what embroidered on his clothes was actually a monster with a body like a snake, claws like a bird, and wings like a bat.

Although nobody knew the origin of this monster, although the monster was only an embroidered image on the robe, seeing its fearsomeness, everybody immediately felt chilliness creeping into their hearts; without realizing it, they all wanted to close the lapel of their clothes.

Lu Xiaofeng still acted as if he did not see.

The old man in green: "Do you recognize us now?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Still not."

The withered thin face of the old man in green seemed to turn very dark green; he stretched out his hand suddenly and pierced the table.

With a loud 'thunk!' his five bird-claw like fingernails went into the

table. When he pulled back the hand, five holes appeared on the two, three cun thick of wooden plank.

'Crash, bang!' the half section of the iron chain fell down to the ground as Chief Yang's limbs suddenly turned weak.

There was also unspeakable stench appeared in the room as three constables rushed out of the door; their pants looked wet.

Lu Xiaofeng could not pretend not to recognize anymore, he finally sighed, "Good skill."

The old man in green with cold laugh: "You can also recognize this as a good skill?"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled and nodded.

Actually, he had early on recognized the origin of these three strange old men; although his face was smiling, his palms were sweating cold sweats.

The old man in green suddenly closed his eyes; with his face toward the sky he slowly recited, "Nine heavens ten earths, all deities and ghosts, all enter our school in fear, absolutely must listen to our command!"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed: "Now I finally know who you are."

The old man in green sneered.

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "But I still do not know, how did I offend you?"

The old man in green stared hard at him; suddenly he waved his hand.

Immediately from the rear courtyard came a weird sound of bamboo whistle; it sounded like the wailing of a mourning woman, or the sobbing of a ghost with unresolved grievance in the night.

Then came four large bare-chested men, their chests were full with large needles, carrying a very large wooden board, with dark green chrysanthemums piled up on the board.

The eyes of these large men stared blankly as if they were drunk; although their bodies were pierced with sharp needles, not even a single drop of blood came out, they also did not seem to be in pain, their faces showed mysterious and scary smiles instead.

The old men who drank tea also stood up. The three of them walked toward the pile of dark green chrysanthemums on the board, clasping their palms in respect, and softly murmured, "Nine heavens ten earths, all deities and ghosts, all come to protect thee, together ascend to the pinnacle of happiness!"

Lu Xiaofeng could not restrain himself from drawing near and picked up a chrysanthemum from the board. Suddenly his hand froze, because underneath this chrysanthemum flower there was an eye staring at him.

This eye had more white than black, the eyeball bulged out completely; perhaps this person died of extreme fright.

Lu Xiaofeng retreated several steps backward. He heaved a long sigh and said, "Who is this person?"

The old man in green coldly said, "Now he is a dead man."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Who was he when he was still alive?"

The old man in green closed his eyes again; with his face toward the sky he slowly recited, "Nine heavens ten earths, the son of all deities met misfortune and perished, all deities and ghosts sob in fear."

Lu Xiaofeng's countenance changed. "Could it be that he was your Jiaozhu's [Cult Leader] son?"

"Humph," the old man in green snorted.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Could it be that he died under my hands?"

The old man in green coldly said, "The killer must die!"

Lu Xiaofeng took two more steps backward. He took another deep breath and suddenly laughed. "Some people want to arrest me and bring me to justice, some people want me dead, there is only one of me, what shall I do?"

The old man in green shot a cold look toward Chief Yang: "Are you sure you are going to bring him to justice?"

Chief Yang: "No ... no ... I am not sure!"

He had just said a few words when suddenly 'thud, crash!' he was so scared that his knees gave up and he fell kneeling down on the ground.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed: "It looks like I cannot avoid death."

The old man in green: "But I also know that before death you will fight with everything you have."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Absolutely correct!"

He suddenly made his move by snatching a sword and a saber; left hand saber, right hand sword, left hacked down, right thrust forward, he attacked the old man in green for three stances in succession. Not only his style was weird, but the more amazing thing is that he was able to split his mind to do two things at the same time.

The old man in green sneered: "You are playing the axe before the carpenter."

Using two different kinds of skill together was precisely their Cult's unique secret. When Lu Xiaofeng attacked for three stances, he had already seen a way to break it; therefore, he was confident that in three more moves he would be able to disarm Lu Xiaofeng from the saber and the sword.

But right this moment suddenly a 'clang' was heard, Lu Xiaofeng unexpectedly chopped the sword in his right hand with the saber in his left. The saber and sword collided and both broke.

The old man in green did not understand what kind of diversion Lu Xiaofeng was playing; suddenly he saw the pieces of sword and saber flew toward him.

Lu Xiaofeng himself flew high to the sky. He exerted his strength to throw the broken saber and the snapped sword, but he himself leaped backward to escape.

Nobody can describe this kind of speed; even Lu Xiaofeng could not have thought that he can move with this kind of speed.

When one was fighting for his life, oftentimes one would display a potential, which others would find it hard to imagine.

It was windy outside.

Lu Xiaofeng turned around so that the wind was on his back. Riding the wind, he flew toward the roof ridge on the opposite side.

Nobody pursued him yet, but he could hear the sad and shrill voice of the old man in green transmitted by the wind: "You have killed the son of the deities. Even if you are ascending to the sky or entering the earth, it still is difficult for you to run away from death."

Lu Xiaofeng did not ascend to the sky, nor did he enter the earth, but he had arrived at the long alley outside the Silver Hook Casino. He hired a carriage, and returned to the place he awoke this morning.

Finally it was somewhat clear to him what actually was going on.

Those people wanted him to spend the night in the open air of the wilderness so that they could lay the blame on him, they wanted to make him the scapegoat.

He also realized that if he was to tell the experience he encountered the previous night, nobody would believe him.

That iceberg-like beautiful woman certainly would not testify on his behalf; much less right now her fragrance, her foot prints and her shadow had already vanished without a trace.

He must find the evidence himself to wash clean the criminal charge, which even if he had a hundred mouths it would still be difficult for him to refute.

The carriage went through a section of the street and sure enough, they went through the location of a night market, and then passed through a running water, before finally arrived at the place he woke up this morning.

Did he really go through the same road last night? Was this really the place Leng Ruoshuang took him off the carriage last night?

But this place was obviously in the middle of the wilderness; not even a single thatched hut was to be seen, let alone the Golden Hook Casino building.

Lu Xiaofeng laid down on a pile of dry leaves underneath a big tree. He watched the dry leaves blown by the autumn wind and land on his body.

The ground was still damp; it was cold and moist.

Lu Xiaofeng was also calm and cool-headed.

I definitely went through the same road and arrived at the Golden Hook Casino, but there was no building in here.

I definitely heard the voices of people, but there was not even a single shadow in the room.

The note clearly said I was to stay for three days, but I was sent away.

The more he thought about it, the more he was at a loss. This kind of unthinkable matter, even he himself did not believe it, much less others?

Since he could not come out with an alibi, would he have to bear this injustice forever?

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. In reality, he could not laugh even if he wanted to.

'Tweet, tweet, chirp, chirp!' There seemed to be a little bird singing incessantly behind the tree. Lu Xiaofeng frowned, he tapped the bough. Dry leaves fell down like rain, but surprisingly the little bird was still singing. It did not fly away.

This little bird's courage was really not small.

Lu Xiaofeng could not refrain from using his hand to prop up his head and looked back. Who would have thought that the 'Tweet, tweet, chirp, chirp!' of the little bird suddenly turned into 'Bark! Bark! Bark!' of a dog?

How could a little bird turn into a big dog? It was impossible!

Feeling strange, suddenly Lu Xiaofeng saw a boy's head appeared from behind the tree. He stuck his tongue toward Lu Xiaofeng and made faces.

Turned out the dog's bark and the bird's chirp were all made by this little boy. Obviously he was a clever boy. His imitation sounded very much like the original.

The boy squinted his eyes toward Lu Xiaofeng: "I can also imitate the sound of a male dog and a b**ch fighting. If you give me two wen [currency, copper coins], I'll let you hear it."

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng's eyes brightened; he sprang up and hugged and kissed this little boy, he also shove a silver coin in the little boy's bosom, while did not stop saying, "Thank you, thank you!"

The boy was puzzled. He blinked and asked, "You gave me this much

money, yet you thank me?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because you have saved my life."

He laughed and kissed the boy's face again before barking twice and then he made a somersault two zhang [unit of length, 1 zhang is approximately 10 ft or 3 meters] away.

The boy looked at him in disbelief. After many, many years later, this little boy grew up to be an adult and often mentioned this matter to his friends. He was certain that he had met a lunatic that day.

"But that sort of lunatic is very rare," he convinced his friends, "Not only he was very rich, he was very happy as well. I guarantee you will never see a happy lunatic like him."

If somebody would tell him that this 'happy lunatic' had just gone through a bizarre experience, also had just received grievous injustice, so much so that his life was difficult to protect, the boy would certainly not believe it.

If you want others to continually spend money, not only you must let him spend it happily, you must also give him time to earn money.

The Blue Beard was always a principled man; this was his principle.

Therefore, the Silver Hook Casino was not the kind of establishment which open 24 hours a day. It would not open its door before dark, and it would close its door before daybreak, all gambling activity must cease.

The daytime is the time to earn money. If people earn money, only then would they have the money to spend in the evening.

Right now it was not dark yet.

Lu Xiaofeng walked along the quiet and lonely long alley. By the time he reached the Silver Hook Casino, the gambling tables were not open yet.

But the door was actually open. Before dark, no one has ever broken through. Well-mannered frequent visitors all knew the rule here.

Infrequent visitors would not be welcomed in this place.

Lu Xiaofeng pushed the door and walked in. He had barely time to take off the black cloak he just bought and the large hat he had pressed low on his head, covering his eyebrows, when two big and burly men came over and blocked him.

Gambling establishments everywhere must hire a lot of thugs. The Silver Hook Casino was not an exception. Daniu and Xiazi [lit. big ox and blind guy] were the two most fearsome ones among more than a few of thugs.

Blind Guy was actually not blind. Right now, his pair of eyes, which have more white than black, was looking up and down Lu Xiaofeng's body to size him up. "Have you been to this place before?" he asked coldly.

Lu Xiaofeng: "I have."

Blind Guy: "Then you must know the rule here!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Casino also have rules?"

Blind Guy: "Not only it has rules, the rules are stricter than the Yamen."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled.

Big Ox stared at him: "Before dark, even if the Emperor of Heaven came, we would also ask him to get out of here."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I cannot even come in to look around?"

Big Ox: "Cannot."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. Carrying the cloak in his arm, he walked out, but suddenly he turned around and said, "I bet you five hundred taels of silver that you won't be able to lift this stone bench."

One side of the corridor inside the door was adorned with four stone benches. Their weight was indeed not light.

Big Ox sneered and lifted one bench with only one hand. How could others call him 'Da Niu' [big ox] if he was not as strong as an ox?

Lu Xiaofeng laughed again and with a bitter smile said, "Looks like I lost. This five hundred taels of silver is yours."

He really took out five banknotes, worth one hundred taels of silver each and held them out, pinched between his two fingers.

Five hundred taels of silver was not a small amount of money. It would not take them more than twenty taels for the two of them to spend the night at the Apricot Blossoms Pavilion, drinking wine and having fun with women.

Big Ox hesitated, but Blind Guy had already taken the money on his behalf. Even the blind would be able to see the money. Without a doubt the banknotes were genuine.

Blind Guy was smiling ear to ear: "It will soon be dark. You may take a stroll out there for a while and come back here. I might be able to find some thick-pocketed gamblers to accompany you having a good time."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled: "Can't I just take a stroll in here for a moment?"

Big Ox quickly said, "You can't!"

Lu Xiaofeng's face dropped. "Since before dark no gambling is allowed in here, why did you swindle me by betting with me just now?"

Big Ox: "I did not."

Lu Xiaofeng coldly said, "If you did not gamble with me, why did you take my five hundred taels of silver?"

Immediately Big Ox's face turned red, even his neck was blushing. He really had no way to deny.

When you lose an argument with others, use your fists.

Big Ox had just curled his fist when he saw this guy, who seemed to have four eyebrows on his face, suddenly push the stone bench he had just put down with his finger, and to his surprise, a hole appeared on the bench.

Big Ox's face from red turned to green. His curled fist also slowly relaxed.

Blind Guy coughed twice and nudged Big Ox with his elbow. Smiling widely, he said, "It will soon be dark. This honored guest has made a special trip to visit; if we drive people out, we might look too discourteous."

Big Ox nodded immediately: "We do not have any lead-filled dice in here, also there is no woman hiding cards in her buttocks. There is no harm in letting him looking around in here!"

Although he looked like a dumb ox, he was actually not stupid at all.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "Good, you are a good friend," he patted his shoulder, "When I am done gambling tonight, I am going to take you two

to the Apricot Blossoms Pavilion and have some drinks."

Apricot Blossoms Pavilion was the most expensive brothel in town, but its style was actually far inferior to this place, its decor was also not as magnificent as this place.

As far as eyes can see, this casino hall was resplendent in gold and jade, rich and beautiful in its majestic splendor. Even the candlesticks were made of sterling silver. Nobody would give further thought of losing a thousand or two taels of silver in this kind of place.

The large hall was full of gambling equipments, large and small. You name it and you will find it here.

All sides the walls were painted white that it looked like a snow cave, with paintings of famous ancient and contemporary artists and scholars hanging from the ceiling.

The largest scenery painting adorned the middle of the hall, but it was the handiwork of an unknown artist. The painting of dreary and fuzzy clouds and mist covered the distant mountain looked like spilled ink.

It was all right if the painting was hanging someplace else, but hanging in this hall among the famous experts' masterpieces, it looked so out of place that no one usually wanted to look at it.

But Lu Xiaofeng seemed to find this painting to be very interesting. He stood in front of the painting and looked at it from left and right, top to bottom, and seemed to be so fixated that he did not want to move away

from it.

Big Ox and Blind Guy looked at each other with a very weird look on their faces.

Blind Guy rolled his eyes until even more white was visible. He suddenly said, "This painting was the handiwork of our Boss' former brother-in-law; the way he painted was worse than me. On that side is the landscape painting by Jiangnan's number one scholar, Tang Xieyuan. Now that is a landscape painting!"

Big Ox immediately caught on: "Let me show you the painting then you'll know this painting is just a dog's fart!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I'd rather look at the dog's fart painting."

Big Ox: "Why?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed: "Landscape paintings are everywhere, but dog's fart painting is very rare!"

Big Ox was dumbstruck, his face turned deep red.

Others looked at another's dog's fart painting, why was he so anxious?

Blind Guy quietly signaled him with his eyes. The two of them quietly stepped toward Lu Xiaofeng's back. Suddenly they made their move; one on the left the other on the right, they grabbed Lu Xiaofeng together.

Surprisingly, Lu Xiaofeng did not fight back.

Blind Guy sneered: "This kid is sneaky. I can tell as soon as I looked at him. He must not be spared."

Big Ox: "Right, let us take him out first then cripple his arms before we talk again!"

Because with just one strike they were successful, the two men were self-satisfied. They felt like a woman who had just snatched a fat sheep.

Only it was a pity that this sheep was not fat, moreover, it was not a real sheep, but actually a tiger who was wearing a sheepskin.

They wanted to take Lu Xiaofeng out, but suddenly they felt this man weighed more than a thousand catties; instead of lifting him up, they felt they were being raised up.

Lu Xiaofeng raised his arms, and 'Thud!' with equal force he struck Big Ox's head to Blind Guy's. Since their heads were probably quite hard, they both passed out instantly.

Lu Xiaofeng laid these two men down and looked up at the scenery painting on the wall again. He shook his head and sighed. "You are right," he mumbled softly, "This painting is indeed a dog's fart."

Suddenly he reached out and pulled this more than a zhang long, four

or five chi scenery painting [about 10 feet long by 4 or 5 feet wide] down, revealing a secret door behind it.

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes shone. He smiled: "Although the painting looks like a dog's fart, the real dog's fart is actually hidden behind it."

Opening a gambling establishment is naturally not an honest occupation. It is only natural that the people who work in this line of job also lead very abnormal lives. Even their meal time and bedtime are completely different to those of other people.

Right now was exactly their dinner time; that was the reason why the main hall was left to Big Ox and Blind Guy only. And now those two men were down.

Lu Xiaofeng rubbed his hands. He closed his eyes and traced his finger up and down along the outline of the door on the wall. After running his finger for a while, suddenly he pushed and shouted in low voice: "Open!"

Like magic this secret door really opened. Behind the door there were about a dozen steps of stone stairs going down, and beyond the stairs was a strip of passageway!

The passageway was illuminated by lanterns. Underneath the lanterns was another door. By the door stood two burly men, wielding unsheathed sabers in their hands.

The eyes of these two men were staring blankly into the distance, they looked exactly like wooden statues. Clearly Lu Xiaofeng was standing

right in front of them, but it was as if they did not see him at all.

Lu Xiaofeng coughed lightly, but these two men seemed to be deaf.

He heard a soft click as the secret door on top of the stairs closed by itself.

Lu Xiaofeng tried stepping forward, but these two men were still motionless, they did not shout or even try to stop him. He might as well reached out to push the door, and to his surprise the door immediately open.

Inside, the room was brightly illuminated. There were three people sitting around a table. Surprisingly, Lu Xiaofeng recognized two of them.

One was a stunningly beautiful, glamorous like a peach blossom woman, with her hand propping her fragrant cheek, sitting by a crystal wine goblet full of amber colored fragrant wine. With a cold look she stared at Lu Xiaofeng and coldly said, "What took you so long to get here?"

Chapter 2 - Mistakenly Breaking Into a Secret Cave

"This woman is an iceberg, if you want to move her, be careful, your hand will catch frostbite!"

The sparkling-like-wine eyes, the transparent-like-crystal, light-as-a-feather, soft silk gown in apple green. This iceberg-like woman did indeed sit here, opposite to Fang Yufei.

"But you must be careful nonetheless; icebergs are very slippery, you might slip down and fall."

Fang Yufei was smiling. He smiled as he raised his cup toward Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng also smiled. He laughed hard.

Fang Yufei: "I heard you can laugh even though you are extremely angry?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not stop laughing.

Fang Yufei's smile turned into a forced smile: "I know you are angry with me; but I have warned you!"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed: "I remember a friend did indeed warn me; he warned me not to climb the iceberg. That friend is called Fang Yufei."

Fang Yufei's countenance brightened: "I know you will remember."

Lu Xiaofeng: "You know? Are sure you are that Fang Yufei?"

Fang Yufei sighed. With a bitter smile he said, "Actually I wanted to disguise myself as someone else, but I am afraid I won't look authentic!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "At least you can disguise yourself as Lu Xiaofeng!"

Fang Yufei's countenance changed, even his forced smile had disappeared altogether.

Lu Xiaofeng turned his head and laughed: "How about you? Are you that Leng Ruoshuang?"

Fang Yufei suddenly opened his mouth: "She is not surnamed Leng!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You know who she is?"

Fang Yufei: "Nobody knows her better than I do."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why?"

Fang Yufei: "Because I was there when she was born."

Lu Xiaofeng: "So she is your Meimei."

Fang Yufei: "She is Fang Yuxiang."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed again.

The one sitting in between these brother and sister was wearing a very exquisite outfit; his appearance looked very refined, his demeanor was like a highly educated middle-age scholar. His facial features were delicate; his lips red and his teeth white. In his younger days certainly a lot of people would say that he looked like a child. Now that he had advanced in years, Lu Xiaofeng could still say that he looked like a girl.

This man was also laughing.

Lu Xiaofeng was looking at him: "Since she is Fang Yuxiang, you must be the Blue Beard."

Blue Beard: "Do you have any feng [Phoenix]?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I don't."

Blue Beard: "Since Lu Xiaofeng [little phoenix] can have no phoenix, then the Blue Beard can also have no beard."

Lu Xiaofeng stared at him for half a day. With a bitter smile he said, "What you said make a lot of sense. But I still don't understand; a man like you, why are you called the Blue Beard?"

Blue Beard: "Operating a gambling establishment is not an easy matter. You don't want to eat others, but others want to eat you. A man with my look should not have earned his rice from this line of work."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because others saw your delicate and refined features, they thought you are an easy target to be bullied, so they wanted to eat you."

Blue Beard nodded and sighed: "Therefore, I need to find another way."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What way?"

Blue Beard did not answer this question right away; he turned his head around and used his long sleeve to cover his face.

When he turned back, his face had changed, he turned into a dark-faced, bucked-tooth, with thick eyebrows and glowering eyes, man. On top of that, his mouth was covered with a beard, a black with tinge of blue, full beard.

Lu Xiaofeng was startled, but suddenly he laughed and said, "I understand it now. The Blue Beard actually has two personalities. You really have not disappointed me."

Blue Beard also laughed and said, "Lu Xiaofeng is truly Lu Xiaofeng. You also have not disappointed me."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

Blue Beard: "We have calculated before, that sooner or later you will find this place!"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed: "I did not think that I would be able to find this place."

Blue Beard: "But you have come."

Lu Xiaofeng: "That was because my luck was good, I met a boy who can imitate a dog's bark."

Blue Beard: "Boys who can imitate dogs' bark are many."

Lu Xiaofeng: "But some people not only can imitate a dog's bark, as soon as they open their mouths, they can produce all kinds of sound!"

Blue Beard smiled: "I know that kind of people; they can imitate the sound of running water, the sound of a carriage going over the bridge, the voices of many people shopping in the marketplace and haggling over the price. They can imitate all kinds of noise very well."

Lu Xiaofeng: "It seems to me that this person not only can imitate sounds, he also masters ventriloquism!"

Blue Beard said with a laugh, "I did not know you are an expert in this matter."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Out of a hundred different skills, I am an expert in at least 80. It should be easy for a man like me to get rich, it's a pity that I have one weakness!"

Blue Beard: "Oh?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I like women, especially women who I should not like." He sighed and then continued, "Therefore, although I am smart and competent, I often fall under a woman's trickery."

Blue Beard smiled: "A man who has never fallen under a woman's trickery cannot be considered a true man!"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed: "It was precisely because I am a genuine-article-and-reasonably-priced man that I volunteered to be your wife's bodyguard, to accompany her sitting in that carriage going around in circle. Just like a fool I obediently let her to cover my eyes."

Blue Beard: "At that time you did not think that she would bring you back here?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "It was not until I met that boy that I thought the night market and the running water were all in someone's mouth."

Blue Beard laughed: "Not only this person knows ventriloquism, he can also drive a carriage."

Lu Xiaofeng: "The sound in that empty room, certainly also came from his lips!"

Blue Beard: "No."

Lu Xiaofeng was startled: "No? An empty room can also produce sounds?"

Blue Beard: "The empty room is actually located underneath the gambling hall. If the vent is opened, the noise from above will be transmitted down."

With a bitter smile Lu Xiaofeng said, "No wonder I could not think of how he could get out of that room!"

Blue Beard: "And now you certainly have figured out why we did this?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "You intentionally wanted me to be totally disoriented so that I won't be able to figure out where exactly I was last night, and then you masquerade yourself as me and did all kinds of crime and let me be the scapegoat!"

Blue Beard: "Wrong!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Wrong? Really?"

Blue Beard: "We do not want you to be the scapegoat. Not at all. We only want you to do one thing for us!"

Fang Yufei joined in: "If you are successful, not only we will immediately wash your name clean, we will also give you anything you care to ask for!"

With a cold laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "What if I want to be your brother-in-law? Can I?"

Blue Beard: "You can." He smiled and continued, "Friends are like hands and feet, wives are like clothes. You can change clothes anytime you like!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "How many times have you changed?"

Blue Beard: "Only once. I traded four to get one!"

Lu Xiaofeng burst out in laughter: "I am surprised someone like you can also make a losing business deal."

There were several scrolls of paper arranged on the shelf behind them. The Blue Beard took a scroll and handed it over to Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng asked: "Who drew this painting?"

Blue Beard: "Li Shentong!" [lit. divine child, a prodigy]

Lu Xiaofeng: "What kind of person is Li Shentong?"

Blue Beard: "He is my former wife's younger brother!"

Actually, Lu Xiaofeng had received the painting, but as soon as he heard it, he pushed the scroll back. "Other people's paintings, I might be interested in looking. But this fellow's painting, no, thank you."

Blue Beard smiled: "There is no harm in you looking at this painting. Regardless of how dreadful a painting might be, it won't frighten you to death just by looking at it once or twice."

With a bitter smile Lu Xiaofeng said, "I am not afraid to be frightened to death, I only afraid I will die of aggravation." However, he took the scroll and unfolded it anyway.

To his surprise, the painting was about four women. Three of them were younger; they were picking flower or chasing butterfly. The other woman looked considerably older. She bore the air of a respectable madam, sitting straight underneath a gazebo, as if she was watching over the other women.

Blue Beard: "These four women were all my wives."

Lu Xiaofeng looked at the four women in the painting, he also looked at Fang Yuxiang. "Looks like your business dealing is not a total loss after all," he muttered.

Blue beard: "My ex-brother-in-law did not fear neither the Heaven nor the Earth, but he fears his Jiejie. When he drew this painting, obviously he did not dare to draw his Jiejie too ugly, but he drew the other women a

bit uglier instead. Just by looking at this painting, although you meet them, you might not necessarily be able to recognize them."

Lu Xiaofeng stared at him: "Why would I want to meet them?"

Blue Beard: "Because I want you to find them."

Lu Xiaofeng: "So you want me to find women who you yourself did not want anymore?"

Blue Beard: "I just want you to ask them and get one thing for me."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What thing?"

Blue Beard: "Luocha Tablet." [Luocha is a demon in Buddhism. I haven't read the White Hair Demoness by Liang Yusheng, but I believe this is the same Luocha as in Yu Luocha, the title character.]

Lu Xiaofeng knitted his eyebrows; his countenance seemed to change a little bit. He had never seen the Luocha Tablet, but he had heard about it.

The Luocha Tablet was a piece of jade tablet, an ancient jade tablet which was probably thousands of years old. Its worth was said to be comparable to the amount of money paid by the king of Qin in exchange to Yan Kingdom's eighteen fortified cities [not sure about this part].

The jade tablet was actually not too big. The front surface was engraved with seventy-two demons and twenty-six evil spirits. The

opposite side was engraved with Buddhist scripture. It was said that from beginning to the end, there were more than a thousand characters.

Blue Beard: "Not only the jade tablet itself is already priceless, it is also the treasured object of the Devil Cult of the Western Region. To the Devil Cult disciples all around the world, seeing this jade tablet is the same as seeing their Jiaozhu [Cult Leader] personally."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I know!"

Blue Beard: "I am sure you do."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What I don't know is how did this jade tablet end up in your hand?"

Blue Beard: "Someone lost to his last penny, so he pawned this thing to me for five hundred thousand taels; but he had lost it all again in one night!"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed: "This person really knows how to lose!"

Blue Beard: "In the thirteen years of the Sliver Hook Casino's history, he holds the record as the biggest loser!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You did not know who he was at that time?"

Blue Beard: "I only knew he was surnamed Yu [jade], and called Tianbao [the jewel of heavens]. I have never dreamed that he was the son of Yu

Luocha of the Western Region."

Actually, what kind of person was Yu Luocha of the Western Region? Was he a man or a woman? Was he ugly or handsome?

Nobody knew.

Nobody had ever seen his true identity.

But everybody believed that for the last several years, the most mysterious character of the Wulin world, the most fearsome, was undoubtedly him!

Not only his personality and martial art skill were mysterious, he was also the founder of the most mysterious, the most fearsome cult of the Western Region, the Devil Cult.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Was he alone at that time?"

Blue Beard: "Not only he was alone, he looked like one who visited the Central Plains for the first time!"

Among the young people who lived for a long time outside the Great Wall, there was no one who did not want to experience the glamorous life of the Central Plains.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "Perhaps because it was his first visit that he had fallen just in a short time."

Blue Beard: "After I recognized his origin, I did not dare to accept his jade tablet, but he insisted that I took it."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I'm sure he was anxious to win that five hundred thousand taels of gambling capital back."

Blue Beard: "Actually, he was not anxious to win the money back, he was ready to lose again."

Lu Xiaofeng: "People who love to gamble would gamble just for the sake of gambling, winning or losing does not make any difference. However, without gambling capital they cannot gamble. Therefore, to acquire gambling capital, a lot of people pawn everything, even their own wives."

Blue Beard: "It's just that pawning your wife, you may or may not redeem her, but pawning this jade tablet, there is no other option, he must redeem it. That's why after I accepted this jade tablet, I was trembling with fear, not knowing where would be the best place to hide it."

Lu Xiaofeng: "So where did you hide it?"

Blue Beard: "Originally it was hidden inside a secret cash box underneath my bed."

Lu Xiaofeng: "And now?"

Blue Beard sighed: "Now it's gone!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You know who took it?"

Blue Beard said, "The secret cash box is reinforced with three iron gates on the outside. Only two people can open it."

Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Other than you, who else can open it?"

Blue Beard replied, "Li Xia!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Is she the one looking at the painting underneath the gazebo?"

Blue Beard sneered: "She was married to me for more than ten years; I don't think I have ever seen her holding a book!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "She was married to you for more than ten years; yet you casually sent them away just like that?"

Blue Beard: "I gave them five hundred thousand taels each."

Lu Xiaofeng coldly said, "With five hundred thousand taels you bought a woman's several years' worth of youth. Not a bad business deal, actually!"

Blue Beard sighed: "I also realize that they certainly are not satisfied,

hence ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Hence they stole that jade tablet to vent their anger!"

Blue Beard smiled bitterly: "But she is a bit too harsh. She definitely knew that if I cannot hand the jade tablet over, the people of Western Region's Devil Cult would surely not spare me!"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "The deeper the love, the more extreme the hatred. Maybe that's why she wanted your life."

Blue Beard: "But I don't want her life at all, I only want the jade tablet back."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Do you know her whereabouts?"

Blue Beard: "She went outside the Great Wall. Probably she just wanted to go north, but for some reason she stopped by Rahasu by the Songhua River [located in Jilin province, through Harbin, a tributary of Heilongjiang] and took residence in that vicinity. I think she is wintering there."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Now it is already the tenth month, and you really want me to travel tens of thousands li [1 li is approximately 0.5km] to that damned place where one's nose can freeze, to find someone for you?" [Translator's note: previously, the months were translated into Gregorian calendar's months, but since the Chinese calendar differs slightly from the Gregorian's, I decided to keep it as it is, *i.e.* 'the tenth month' instead of 'October'.]

Blue Beard: "You can always cover your nose with a piece of sheepskin."

Lu Xiaofeng was silent.

Blue Beard: "If you have any thoughts, you might as well speak up so that we can discuss it together."

Lu Xiaofeng was lost in thought for a moment before saying, "I only want to say one sentence."

Blue Beard: "Only one sentence?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "This one sentence has only two words."

Blue Beard: "Two words?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "See you!"

As soon as he said those two words, he stood up and left.

Unexpectedly, the Blue Beard did not stop him, he smiled instead and said, "You really want to leave? I won't see you out then."

Even if he wanted to send him off, he would not have enough time, because Lu Xiaofeng had already leaped over the door like a frightened rabbit.

Outside the door, the two burly men were still standing like a pair of wooden statues. He could still hear Fang Yufei sighed inside the room: "Such a good wine is already prepared, but he walked away without drinking any. It's a pity, really."

Fang Yuxiang coldly replied, "There are some people who are tramps by nature. Wine offered in toast they do not want, wine they are forced to drink they would seek."

Lu Xiaofeng could only pretend he did not hear anything. Within the last month he had gotten himself into too many troubles. He had decided he needed some time to recuperate; he did not want to meddle into other people's business any longer.

Besides, Ouyang Qing was still in Beijing, recovering from her injuries while keeping company the newly-wed Mrs. Ximen Chuixue, who was going to have a baby.

He had given them his promise that when the snow starts to fall, he would return to Beijing to accompany them eating mutton soup.

Thinking about those pair of affectionate and loving eyes of Ouyang Qing, he decided that first thing tomorrow he would leave for Beijing.

He climbed over the eighteen steps of the stone stairs in just a few bounces of his feet. Although the door at the top was closed, he was confident that he could reopen it.

"The Silver Hook Casino ... beautiful iceberg girl ... empty room with iron panel ... Western Region's Yu Luochoa ..."

He was determined to treat all this as merely a nightmare.

Too bad he was not dreaming at all.

He had just pushed the door open when he heard someone was speaking with a laugh outside: "Whatever Seniors want, drinking wine or gambling, just put it in my account."

A cold voice replied, "Your account? Who do you think you are?"

This man's voice was so dry and sharp, and very full of himself, as if he was always ready to curse people whenever he opens his mouth.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. He did not need to look to know who this person was. But he was still unable to restrain himself from taking a peek. With his finger he pulled the painting hanging over the door a little bit. Immediately he saw that old man in green, whose robe was embroidered with a monster, was standing at the front door with his hands behind his back. With flashing eyes he was looking around the room.

Behind him, the one who speaks with a laugh, was Chief Yang, who in normal times always shows off his authority as a government official.

Turning his gaze to the side, Lu Xiaofeng noticed that the other two old men in green had also come. Their expressions were equally cold and indifferent to. Similarly, their eyes were also bright. Both sides of their

temples were bulging, just like two meatballs sticking out of their heads. Someone with keen eyesight would immediately realize that internal energy of these men was immeasurably deep.

Where did these three old monsters come from? Lu Xiaofeng heaved a sigh and gently pulled the door close. With a somersault he landed back at the bottom of the stairs.

The two wooden-statue-like burly men watched him as he walked back; there was a glint of laughter in their eyes.

This time Lu Xiaofeng pretended not to see them; he walked back into the room in big strides while calling out loudly, "Hurry up to prepare the wine for me. The one-who-would-rather-drink-forced-wine-over-the-offered-wine-in-toast is coming."

The wine had already been prepared.

Lu Xiaofeng quickly downed thirteen cups in just one breath. Fang family's brother and sister, along with the Blue Beard, only watched him drink.

"We already knew you would come back." They did not say these words; they did not need to say these words.

Lu Xiaofeng downed three more cups before he stopped and said, "Is it enough?"

Blue Beard laughed: "Is it true that forced wine is better than offered

wine?"

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed: "As long as it is free, the wine is always good."

Blue Beard burst out in laughter: "In that case I'll offer you sixteen more cups!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You're on!" Unexpectedly he really drank sixteen more cups, then plopped his butts on a chair. His eyes started at Blue Beard. Suddenly he asked, "Are you really afraid of the Western Region's Yu Luocho?"

Blue Beard: "I am!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Yet you have the guts to kill Yu Tianbao?"

Blue Beard: "I do not have such big guts. He did not die in my hand."

Lu Xiaofeng: "He did not?"

Blue Beard shook his head: "But I do know who the real killer is. If you can find the Luocho Tablet for me, I can find the killer for you to be delivered to the Sui Han San You [Three Friends of Eternal Winter]!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Sui Han San You? Aren't they the Kunlun Mountains' Great Brightness Mirror, Heavenly Dragon Mountain Cave's Sui Han San You?"

Blue Beard: "They have lived in seclusion in that place for more than twenty years. I am surprised you still know their name."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed: "I am also surprised that they are not dead yet."

Blue Beard: "I am afraid you will be even more surprised to know that they are now the Law Protector Elders of the Yu Luocha Cult of the Western Region."

[Translator's note: for some reason this Cult reminds me a lot of the Ming Cult. The original text of 'law protector' is 'hu fa', with 'hu' – protect, and 'fa' – religious law; the same characters Jin Yong used in 'hu jiao fa wang', with 'jiao' means Cult and 'wang' means King.]

Lu Xiaofeng sighed: "Unexpectedly he is able to subdue these three old freaks; apparently his ability is truly not bad!"

Blue Beard: "Luckily I have a way to deal with him."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What way?"

Blue Beard: "First, retrieve the Luocha Tablet and return it to him, then find the killer and hand it over to him, afterwards go hiding as far away as possible and never to provoke him anymore."

With a bitter smile Lu Xiaofeng said, "Looks like that is the only way."

Blue Beard: "Therefore, while the weather is not too cold yet, you'd

better leave for Rahasu immediately!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Are you sure your Li Xia is over there?"

Blue Beard: "I am sure she is there!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "How do you know?"

Blue Beard: "Naturally I have a way to get the information."

Lu Xiaofeng: "When I am there, you are sure I can find her?"

Blue Beard: "As long as you agree to go, even if you cannot find her, there will be someone who will lead you to her!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Who?"

Blue Beard: "When you get there, someone will make a contact with you."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Who?"

Blue Beard: "Just go and you will find out!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Those three old freaks are outside, how am I going to go out?"

Blue Beard smiled and said, "A smart rabbit's hole has three way outs; this place naturally cannot have only one outlet!"

He turned around and pulled open the pear flower shaped cabinet door on the wall behind him. Immediately a secret door appeared.

Lu Xiaofeng did not wait for anybody to say anything anymore. He stood up and walked away.

Blue Beard: "You do not need to fear they are going to pursue you. Once they know you are painstakingly looking for the Luochoa Tablet, they are not going to bump even a single strand of hair on your body."

Lu Xiaofeng walked around the table toward the secret door. Suddenly he turned his head around and said, "I have something I'd like to ask!"

Blue Beard was listening.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Since Yu Tianbao was the son of Yu Luochoa of the Western Region, certainly he was not stupid."

Blue Beard nodded in acknowledgement.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Then who won his five hundred thousand taels of silver?"

Fang Yuxiang: "I did."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

Fang Yufei sighed: "Too bad easy come easy go. In less than two days, she has lost that hundred thousand taels of silver again."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Whom did she lose it to?"

Blue Beard: "To me!"

Lu Xiaofeng burst out in laughter. "This is called 'dragon matches dragon, 'phoenix matches phoenix, compulsive gambler [orig. 'du gui' – gambling ghost] matches compulsive gambler, bedbug matches bedbug'!" He was still laughing hard when he walked out the door. Outside the door there was another multi-paneled door. He reached out and knocked. 'Ding! Ding!' It was indeed iron panel.

After walking through the tunnel again, he climbed about a dozen or so stone steps, and already he saw starlight filled the sky.

The stars were shining bright. The night was very deep.

The night breeze was blowing. Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng felt very cold, because he remembered that very soon he would have to take the long journey to the distant place, the eternally freezing Songhua River, the ice-covered Rahasu.

Suddenly he thought the cold was unbearable.

Right now it was still autumn. The end of autumn.

Chapter 3 – Flying Into Glamour and Good Fortune

Everybody knew Lu Xiaofeng was an adventurer.

Adventure can also be considered a disease, just like cancer. It's not easy to cure, but wanting to catch the disease is equally not easy. Therefore, nobody has ever turned into an adventurer overnight. If someone suddenly turns into an adventurer, there must be a very unusual reason behind it.

It was said that when Lu Xiaofeng was around seventeen years of age, he went through a very painful experience, which led him to almost jump into the river. It was then that he turned into an adventurer.

An adventurer would never jump into a river, unless the water that day happened to be warm, and a very beautiful girl happened to take a bath in the river. He also happened to possess a very good water skill.

Adventurers would never mistreat themselves, because in this world, the only one who would take care of them is themselves.

Lu Xiaofeng had always taken good care of himself. If a carriage was available, he would never walk. If there was a three-tael a night inn to spend the night, he would never stay in a 2.9-tael inn.

The 'heavenly' character of the 'Heavenly Good Fortune Inn' refers to several of the best rooms, and the rent was precisely three taels a night. Those who had stayed in the 'Heavenly Good Fortune Inn' all agreed that the three taels a night rent was not price-gouging.

The beds were spacious and comfortable, with clean bed sheets and goose down pillows. Hot water was available for a hot bath anytime of the day.

Lu Xiaofeng was lying down on the bed. He had just taken a hot bath and had eaten a nice dinner, plus two catties of very good Bamboo-leaf Green wine.

Regardless of who was in this condition, only exhaustion would take over, and the only thing to do was shut his eyes and sleep.

Lu Xiaofeng had closed his eyes, but he just could not fall asleep. He simply had too many things in his mind right now.

There seemed to be a hole in this matter, but he could not figure it out.

Right now, as soon as he closed his eyes, he would see two women.

One woman was wearing light, apple-green, soft silk gown. Her entire beautiful face was completely without makeup, her expression was always icy cold, just like a piece of iceberg.

The other was like the sunshine in the spring time, or the spring water under the warm sun, gentle, tender, flattering, and arousing. Especially her eyes. When she looked at you, you would feel for an instant that your soul has left you.

Lu Xiaofeng's soul had not left him yet; simply because she had not looked straight into Lu Xiaofeng's eyes yet. But Lu Xiaofeng had actually looked straight at her. As a matter of fact, he saw her nearly all the time these past two days, because she had been closely following Lu Xiaofeng, as if there was an invisible thread pulling her behind him.

Lu Xiaofeng had been followed by other people, as well as he followed other people. It's just that there were three groups of people following him. For Lu Xiaofeng, this was actually the first time in all his life.

Three groups of people did not mean three people.

That gentle-and-tender-like-the-spring-time-water girl was one of them, but she was the only one in her group.

The second group consisted of five people. Some were tall, some were short, some were old, and some were young. They all rode on big and tall horses, and they all wore sharp swords and long sabers. Each one of them looked at Lu Xiaofeng with glowering eyes, as if they were not afraid that he would know about their presence.

But Lu Xiaofeng pretended he did not see them. As a matter of fact, he really did not know these five people's origin, and he did not know why they were following him.

The third group of people consisted of three men wearing square hats. They dressed like old Confucian scholars, and rode on a large carriage, complete with an attendant. They brought along tea set and wine pot, as if they were on vacation, enjoying the beauty of nature along the way. But Lu Xiaofeng was able to recognize them as soon as he saw them. No

matter how they dress, he would always recognize them.

Because although they can change their appearance, they would never be able to change the cold and arrogant look on their faces, the expression that says they were without equal in the world.

These three old scholars, naturally were the present days' Law Protector Elders of the Devil Cult of the Western Region, the Kunlun Mountains' Great Brightness Mirror, Heavenly Dragon Mountain Cave's Sui Han San You.

Lu Xiaofeng did not try to avoid them at all, they were also following him from some distance away, did not try to overtake him at all.

Because the Blue Beard had told them.

"If there is any one person in the world who can retrieve the LuoCha Tablet back for you, that person must be Lu Xiaofeng."

Lu Xiaofeng stopped by the Heavenly Good-fortune Inn to spend the night. He was wondering if those three groups of people also stayed at the Heavenly Good-fortune Inn?

What, actually, were they going to do to Lu Xiaofeng? Would they make their move tonight?

Lu Xiaofeng sighed silently. He was not the least bit afraid others would trouble him, but to simply wait helplessly for others to come and give him trouble was not a pleasant feeling at all.

While he was still sighing, someone suddenly knocked on his door.

They're here! Finally they're here!

Which group had come? And what did they want to do?

Lu Xiaofeng simply lay down on the bed; not only did he not move, he did not even ask. He only called out loudly: "Come in!"

The door was pushed open, and in came a servant carrying hot water kettle.

Although Lu Xiaofeng relaxed, he was actually very disappointed.

Not only he was not afraid others would come and give him trouble, sometimes he even wished others would come quickly to give him trouble.

Although the servant said that he came to add hot water to the teapot, his manner seemed to be a bit suspicious. While pouring water into the pot, he tried to strike a conversation, "The weather is very cold. It feels like it is already the twelfth month."

Lu Xiaofeng just looked at him. He knew this kid would surely continue.

Sure enough, the servant said, "Such a cold weather, sleeping alone must be uncomfortable!"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed: "Are you saying that you are going to find a woman to accompany me sleep?"

The servant also laughed: "Don't Mister Guest want to look for a woman?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Of course I want a woman, but I must know first: what kind of woman?"

The servant narrowed his eyes and laughed: "Other women, I dare not say anything. But this woman, I guarantee Mister Guest will be satisfied, because ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because what?"

The servant laughed again, a vague laugh, a very mysterious laugh. He lowered his voice and said, "This woman is not local, she actually does not do this line of work. Besides, other than Mister Guest, she does not seem to be interested in other guests."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Could it be that she was to one who sent you here?"

Unexpectedly the servant nodded.

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes shone; immediately that gentle-and-tender-like-the-spring-time-water girl appeared in his mind.

He had not guessed wrong.

The one the servant brought back was really her.

"This is Miss Ding, Ding Xiangyi. This gentleman is Young Master Lu. You two can get better acquainted."

The servant laughed his mysterious laugh, then slipped out of the room and closed the door behind him.

Ding Xiangyi stood silently under the lantern with her head lowered. Her tender and elegant hands were playing with the corner of her garment.

She did not say anything. Lu Xiaofeng also did not say anything.

He was determined to see what kind of trick this woman was going to play in his presence. And he got his wish rather quickly.

The lantern light was bright. A beautiful woman was standing under the light.

She had not opened her mouth, but suddenly, using her two fingers she gently pulled the belt on her clothes.

Once the belt was loosened, the front lapels of her robe also loosened, and her breasts, as white as snow and as pure as jade, with her two small reddish nipples, suddenly appeared in front of Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng was so startled that he jumped.

He had never thought that her clothes were fastened by only one belt; he was even more surprised that underneath the clothes, she did not wear anything, not even a piece of ribbon.

This kind of clothing was actually easier to take off than a baby's diaper.

Therefore, that graceful, charming, yet shy respectable young lady of a moment ago now suddenly turned into an innocent newborn baby. Other than her own skin, nothing covered her body.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed: "Are you always this straightforward toward other people?"

Ding Xiangyi shook her head: "When playing hide-and-seek, I like to circle around."

She smiled. With the pair of innocent and naive eyes she was looking straight at him. "But you called me here not to play hide-and-seek!"

Lu Xiaofeng could only admit: "No, I did not!"

Ding Xiangyi sweetly said, "I am not here to accompany you playing hide-and-seek either."

With a bitter smile Lu Xiaofeng said, "I can see that."

In a soft voice Ding Xiangyi said, "Since you already know what I am here for, and I also know what you want, then why do we still circle around as if we are playing hide-and-seek?"

Her smile became even more seductive, even more captivating. It's just that the most captivating part of her body was not her smile, but the part which some men should not look, yet they always want to look anyway.

Lu Xiaofeng was a man.

He suddenly felt that his own heartbeat was getting faster, his breathing quickened, even his mouth felt dry.

Obviously Ding Xiangyi could also see these changes on his body, especially the other part which underwent an even more pronounced change.

"I can see that you are a grown man, and I'm also certain that you don't like playing hide-and-seek anymore!"

She slowly walked near, and suddenly she slipped into his blanket, just like a fish slips into the water. Lithe, slippery, and natural.

But her body actually was unlike the fish.

Whether it was in the river, the stream or in the ocean, there have never been a fish whose body was like her. Sleek, soft, and warm.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "Damn it!" he cursed himself in his heart.

Each time he realized he was not able to resist some kind of temptation, he always cursed himself first.

Afterwards, he would be ready to accept the temptation.

He had just reached out with his hand when suddenly, 'pop, pop, pop!' three times; three metal awls, three flying daggers, three divine arrows, flew in from outside the window all at the same time, straight toward their bodies, hard and fast.

Ding Xiangyi's face changed; she was about to scream.

But before any noise came out of her mouth, these nine secret projectiles, which flew in lightning fast, suddenly fell down without any reason. Each secret projectile broke into two pieces.

Because Ding Xiangyi was about to scream, her mouth stayed open. Suddenly she heard 'Bang!' Someone broke through the door brandishing a steel saber in his hand.

This man looked strong and was wearing tight clothing. Not only his expression was fierce, his movements were also extremely swift and fierce; obviously he was an expert in external martial arts.

Who would have thought that as soon as he barged in, he suddenly

leaped high backward, as if there was an invisible hand grabbing his neck from behind.

There was another 'Bang!' as the window was struck open, another man brandishing a pair of sabers with a wild roar charging in from the outside. But with another roar he flew out through the window on the opposite side of the room. 'Boom!' he fell heavily on the flagstones outside the window.

Ding Xiangyi saw everything clearly, yet she did not have the slightest clue on what was actually happening.

Right this moment yet another man rushed in from the door straight toward the head of the bed. With the ghost-headed saber in his hand raised high, he stared at Lu Xiaofeng and in stern voice said, "I kill you, you ..."

This sentence of his was only half spoken, the saber in his hand also had not chopped down, but he crumpled down, his limbs shrunk, his face turned black, as if he was suddenly possessed by a ghost. His entire body curled into a ball and suddenly he rolled out of the door.

The room was full of daggers, swords, secret projectiles flying here and there; several tall and strong men rushing in and out, but Lu Xiaofeng seemed to be oblivious of it all. He was still lying on the bed, unmoving.

A gust of wind blew. The pushed open door suddenly closed automatically, the stricken window also closed on its own.

Lu Xiaofeng's expression still remained unchanged, as if he had already known that even the sky was falling down on him, some people would certainly support it for him.

Ding Xiangyi looked at him in amazement. She slowly reached out to feel his forehead, and then also felt his chest.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed: "I haven't been scared to death yet!"

Ding Xiangyi: "And you are not sick!"

Ding Xiangyi sighed and said, "Your ancestors must have done a lot of good deeds, that you can turn misfortune into blessing, calamity into safety, that anywhere you go, there will be deities and demons protecting you in secret!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You are absolutely correct. Nine heavens ten earths, various deities numerous demons, are all protecting me in secret!"

Revealing his teeth, he grinned evilly. Although he had not looked into the mirror, he knew his face would certainly look very sinister, almost as sinister as those people of the Western Region's Devil Cult.

But Ding Xiangyi only laughed. She winked and smiled: "Since there are deities and demons protecting you, I don't have to be afraid, we can still ..."

Her hand started to move underneath the blanket.

Lu Xiaofeng felt as if he was jolted by a lightning. He looked at her in shock: "After those kinds of things, you still have the interest?"

Ding Xiangyi smiled coyly; she replied his question with her actions.

Right this moment, suddenly the lantern went off, the room was covered in darkness.

In such a dark room, anything can happen.

Who can tell what was going to happen in that room?

Lu Xiaofeng's sleep was very sweet. He had not enjoyed this kind of sweet sleep in such a long, long time.

He was not a sage.

And neither was she.

When he woke up, he could still smell the lingering fragrance on the pillow, but the person actually had disappeared.

Lu Xiaofeng stared at the ceiling with eyes open wide. He was lost in thought for half a day. "Could it be that she followed me all the way just because she wanted me ..."

He forbade himself to continue his thought; he had sworn long ago that he would not think himself as a gift to the opposite sex, that he would not to be infatuated with himself.

The sunlight streamed in through the window pane. The weather was very good that day.

When the weather was good, he was always in an unusually happy mood. But as soon as he pushed the window open, he saw five not-so-happy things.

He saw five coffins.

Ten men, carrying five brand new coffins, had passed through the courtyard, and out the main gate.

The ones lying in the coffins must be those five men riding the big tall horses, the men who tailed him.

Who were they, actually? Why did they follow him? Why did they want his life?

Lu Xiaofeng was completely clueless.

He only knew that these five people must have died under those three 'Old Scholars' staying in the room on the other side of the yard.

He also knew that it was not him they were protecting, but the white

jade they wanted him to retrieve.

"If there is any one person in the world who can retrieve the LuoCha Tablet back for you, that person must be Lu Xiaofeng."

The three 'Old Scholars' on the opposite side were staring coldly at him. Two were drinking tea, the other one was drinking wine. Their piercing gaze was sharper than the point of a needle, probably they were telling Lu Xiaofeng: "If you cannot retrieve that LuoCha Tablet, we can always kill you just like that anytime!"

Lu Xiaofeng closed the window. Only then did he discover that the secret projectiles, which were struck to the ground the previous night, had disappeared. Only about eight, nine pieces of pebbles were left on the floor.

Ding Xiangyi actually reappeared.

With a steaming hot soup bowl in her hands, she walked in from outside. Seeing Lu Xiaofeng, an angelic sweet smile appeared on her face. With a gentle voice she said, "I know you must be awake by this time, so I went to the kitchen to prepare a bowl of chicken soup especially for you. Quickly drink it while it's still hot."

Lu Xiaofeng was completely speechless.

After staring at him for half a day, Ding Xiangyi laughed and said, "You look very shocked to see me here. Do you suppose I should be gone by now?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not deny at all.

Ding Xiangyi sat down, her smile was even sweeter. She looked at him with the corner of her eye: "But I still don't want to go, what do you say?"

Her smile seemed very mysterious, it looked very strange.

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng remembered; in some business, when you are done, you have to pay. Similarly, after what the woman did, she might be waiting for others to pay her.

She tailed him for two days, probably because she had seen it early on that he was such an open-handed man, so she was prepared to gouge his pocket.

"Luckily I did not think myself as a gift to the opposite sex, I was not infatuated with myself!"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled; he was very proud of himself for having such a mature judgment.

Someone who was very proud of himself would naturally be very open-handed toward others, much less Lu Xiaofeng was not a stingy person to begin with.

He seemed to remember that he still have four or five banknotes in his pocket; each seemed to worth a thousand taels of silver. But when he

reached into his pocket, he realized that he only have two left. Yet he still pulled one out and waved it in front of Ding Xiangyi.

Ding Xiangyi looked at the banknote then she looked at him. "Is that for me?" she asked.

Lu Xiaofeng nodded.

Ding Xiangyi smiled. A very strange smile indeed.

"Does she think it is too little?"

Immediately Lu Xiaofeng pulled the last banknote from his pocket. It was his entire fortune. After he used it all up, how would he manage afterwards? Basically he did not even want to think about it.

Ding Xiangyi looked at the banknote again, then she looked at him. Suddenly she also pulled out from her bosom piles of banknotes, each also worth a thousand taels of silver. There were at least forty, fifty banknotes.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Is that for me?"

Ding Xiangyi: "All for you."

Lu Xiaofeng was so surprised that his face looked like, while yawning, a piece of meatball suddenly fell from the sky and landed on his mouth.

In all his life he had gone through countless dangerous, secretive, and mysterious situations, but he had never been shocked like this time.

Ding Xiangyi suddenly asked: "Do you know what the term 'eating easy rice' means?"

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head.

Ding Xiangyi: "Do you know what the most ancient occupation in the world is?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded his head.

Ding Xiangyi: "A woman who makes money this way usually is called a *****."

Lu Xiaofeng: "And a man who makes money this way is called 'eating easy rice'?"

Ding Xiangyi laughed: "I knew you are a smart man; you understand everything right off!"

Surprisingly, Lu Xiaofeng's face blushed deep red. His expression looked like someone who was forced to stuff his mouth with a stinky duck egg.

Ding Xiangyi looked at him, then giggled and said, "Although I am not pretty, I have never lost money over a 'little white face' [attractive young man (derogatory) *pretty boy* gigolo]!"

Right now Lu Xiaofeng was not a 'little white face' at all, he was a 'big red face'.

Ding Xiangyi continued, "Besides, although you might consider me a *****, I actually know that you are not that kind of person!"

Lu Xiaofeng let out a breath, he seemed to be very appreciative in his heart.

Ding Xiangyi said, "These fifty thousand taels are not mine to give to you!"

Lu Xiaofeng could not bear not to ask, "Then who gives it to me?"

Ding Xiangyi: "It's my Biaojie [older female cousin]."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Who is your Biaojie?"

Ding Xiangyi: "My Biaojie is the Blue Beard's wife, Fang Yufei's meimei."

Lu Xiaofeng croaked: "Fang Yuxiang?"

Ding Xiangyi smiled: "She is also called Xiangxiang."

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbfounded.

Ding Xiangyi: "She knew you are always generous, she was afraid you won't have enough money to spend along the way. She was also afraid you won't be able to sleep at night, and so ..."

She bit her lips and glanced at Lu Xiaofeng with the corner of her eye. "And so she wanted me to keep you accompany!"

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng sneered: "She wanted you to watch over me, didn't she?"

Ding Xiangyi sighed: "I knew you would misunderstand her. Although outwardly she seems to be as cold as ice, she is actually a very compassionate woman, especially toward you ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "How she feels 'toward me'?"

Ding Xiangyi smiled again. An even more mysterious smile. "The two of you spent most part of the night together inside a dark carriage, how she feels toward you, don't you know it in your heart? Why do you have to ask me?"

Lu Xiaofeng's face was devoid of any emotion. He stopped his sneer, but somehow he felt that a bit of sweetness started to creep into his heart. Somehow it felt very good.

Such a sweet and good feeling was enough for a man to let his neck wrapped in a noose.

Thereupon when Lu Xiaofeng left the Heavenly Good-fortune Inn that

day, he had fifty thousand taels more in his pocket, while the number of people tailing behind him was reduced by six. Five had entered the coffins, while one entered his bosom.

Although he did not intentionally have any part on these two matters, he also did not have any way to avoid those matters.

Just like most people in the world, if something was advantageous to him, he usually did not want to think too much about how to avoid it.

Have you ever been followed by nine people? If you have, you would certainly know how good it is to know that the number of those nine people has been reduced to only three.

Too bad Lu Xiaofeng was not able to maintain this good feeling for too long. Because on the next day, he discovered that the number of people tailing behind him had increased from three to ten.

In order to have a good night sleep, Lu Xiaofeng tried not to turn his head as much as he can, he tried to pretend that he did not see those people.

But Ding Xiangyi could not stop turning her head around; she was continually looking back from the small window on the rear of the carriage.

Finally she could not bear not to ask, "Are those people also following you?"

Lu Xiaofeng reluctantly nodded his head.

Ding Xiangyi: "Looks like they have been watching you since last night!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

Ding Xiangyi: "Do you know who they are?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I don't know." He really did not know.

Ding Xiangyi closed the small window. Suddenly she snuggled herself into Lu Xiaofeng's bosom. Coincidentally, her warm body clung to his chest, but her hands were actually colder than ice.

"I am scared!" She hugged him even tighter.

"What are you afraid of?"

"Among those seven people behind us, there is one 'lacking-half' man. He looks so scary!"

"What do you mean 'lacking-half'?"

Lacking-half means his left eye was blind, his left ear was gone, his left hand was replaced by an iron hook, his left leg was also replaced by a wooden leg.

Ding Xiangyi: "Actually, I am more afraid of the other half which are not lacking."

His right eye, nose, and mouth are crooked, they were twisted, completely deformed.

Ding Xiangyi tightly grabbed Lu Xiaofeng's hand: "This man looks like a rag doll which had fallen into the water and then somebody tore the left side of his body."

Lu Xiaofeng: "A rag doll?"

Ding Xiangyi: "He doesn't look old, his stature is also very small; he must have had a round baby face, but now ..."

She had not finished speaking when she noticed Lu Xiaofeng's eyes revealed a loathing look. Immediately she changed her course and asked, "Do you know who he is?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Mmm."

Ding Xiangyi: "You know him?"

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head.

He seemed to be very unwilling to talk about this man, as much as he was unwilling to step his foot on a viper.

But Ding Xiangyi still had to ask, "But you must know what kind of man is he, don't you?"

There are some women who, by nature, always want to get to the bottom of everything. If she wants to know something and you do not tell her, she might not stop pestering you for three days and three nights.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed: "He was originally called 'Yin Yang Kid'. After meeting Sikong Zhaixing, his nickname was changed."

Ding Xiangyi: "Changed to what?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Yin Kid!"

Ding Xiangyi laughed. She said with a wink, "He was originally called 'Yin Yang Kid', it must be because he was neither a male nor a female kind of 'yin-yang' person!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Mmm."

Ding Xiangyi: "But Sikong Zhaixing destroyed the male half of him. And thus he can only be called the 'Yin Kid'."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Mmm."

Ding Xiangyi: "Why didn't Sikong Zhaixing simply kill him?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because Sikong Zhaixing very seldom kills people."

Ding Xiangyi: "Or could it be that Sikong Zhaixing thought that his female half had not done too many bad deeds?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Mmm."

Ding Xiangyi rolled her eyes. She said offhandedly, "I want to find a 'yin yang' person and take a look. I always wonder what difference do they have from other people?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I also have something I always wonder!"

Ding Xiangyi: "What is it?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why you have never blushed?"

Ding Xiangyi's face right now was very red, not because she was blushing, but because she had just taken a hot bath.

The rent of Lucky Inn rooms was also three taels a night, they also supplied hot water any time of the day, day or night.

With one hand holding her hair bun and the other hand holding a towel, she walked from the bathroom on the other side of the corridor into the room. Bumping the door close with her buttocks, she chuckled sweetly, "The room here is too expensive, business is not so good, there is nobody outside, you should come out and take a bath together with me!"

Lu Xiaofeng did not hear her. His full attention was on a sandalwood box.

This box was laid neatly on the square table in front of him. The top of the box was carved with delicate pattern, with its corners inlaid in gold. It looked just like jewelry boxes used by the rich to keep their valuables.

As Ding Xiangyi turned around, she immediately saw the box. "Where did it come from?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "It was delivered by the servant!"

Ding Xiangyi: "Who ordered him to deliver it?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I don't know!"

Ding Xiangyi: "What's inside the box?"

Lu Xiaofeng also did not know.

Ding Xiangyi walked over. "Why don't you open it and take a look? Are you afraid a viper would jump out of the box?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I am afraid a woman will jump out of the box, a woman just like you!"

Ding Xiangyi glowered at him, then she laughed and said, "I wish a man would jump out of the box, better yet, a man just like you!"

She opened the box, and the smile froze on her face, exactly like one who was scared to death.

Inside the wooden box were more than a hundred white teeth, plus five black linen belts. Black linen belts which were soaked in blood.

A tooth for a tooth, blood debt must be paid by blood.

Only after her teeth chattered in fear was she able to croak, "Are these ... are these human teeth?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. His face looked rather pale.

Ding Xiangyi: "What do these five black belts mean?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I don't know."

Ding Xiangyi sighed: "Looks like you don't know anything."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I only know one thing."

Ding Xiangyi: "What is it?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Men's business, it is best if a woman does not meddle too

much, also does not ask too much!"

Surprisingly, this time Ding Xiangyi really obeyed him; she sat down nicely on a chair and closed her mouth.

Unfortunately it was only because she was so frightened that her body turned weak. After regaining her strength a little bit, she opened her mouth again, "I seem to remember the seven people who were following you today also wore black belts!"

Lu Xiaofeng maintained a straight face, but inwardly he was impressed. She did have careful observation skills.

Perhaps women were born with the ability to pay more attention to details than men; especially women, like her, who like to get to the heart of the matter.

Ding Xiangyi: "Could it be that those seven people today are related to the five men who died that night?"

Lu Xiaofeng looked at her. Suddenly he said, "So you are determined to meddle in my business, aren't you?"

Ding Xiangyi sweetly replied, "I am sure you know that at least we are not strangers anymore."

Lu Xiaofeng: "In that case you won't mind doing something for me?"

Ding Xiangyi: "What is it?"

Her face was already blushing with excitement, just like a little girl who had just heard a grown up was going to take her to the temple.

It was the very first time Lu Xiaofeng saw her blushing. Suddenly he discovered that when she was blushing, those pair of seductive, crafty and sly eyes turned into the naïve eyes of an innocent little girl.

He stared at her for half a day before realizing that it was now his turn to say something.

Now was the time for him to put up a façade of a heartless man, not looking at a young girl affectionately like this.

Thereupon he cleared his throat immediately and said in stern voice, "Deliver this box for me to the other side!"

Ding Xiangyi almost screamed, "What did you say?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I want you to deliver this box to the other side, because I am sure the real killer of these five men stay on that side!"

Ding Xiangyi looked at him in disbelief, her countenance paled again.

Lu Xiaofeng coldly said, "What makes you think you can meddle in others' business if you won't dare to do such a trivial thing like this?"

Ding Xiangyi gritted her teeth; she stomped her feet, 'Bang!' she closed the box, lift it up off the table and went out the door without turning her head again.

Lu Xiaofeng deliberately did not look at her. Suddenly he felt that his heart was a lot more harder than it used to be. To an adventurer like him, it was certainly a good thing.

Too bad that in his heart he still did not feel at ease.

Sending a young girl to deliver a wooden box containing dead men's teeth to the three men whose hands had killed them was a cruel thing to do.

"But I have to let them know about this matter!" He consoled himself in his heart, "I must send her there. Remembering their own status, those three old freaks certainly won't give a young girl any trouble!"

After his own heart had calmed down somewhat, he started to think about things he should have thought earlier.

What enmity did these people have against me? Why did they follow me this far and want to take my life?

Why did all of them wear black linen belts? What kind of organization did these people belong to?

Black linen cloth, black linen belt.

Lu Xiaofeng looked down, he wanted to see what color his own belt was, but what caught his attention first was his pair of white socks.

Instantly his mind remembered the 'Red Shoes Sisterhood' and 'Green Shirt Pavilion'.

It's just that in his mind right now, those frightening experiences seemed pale in comparison to the matter at hand.

Right now, the most frightening thing he was facing was these black belt people.

If someone like the Yin Kid also became their subordinate, their organization must be very secretive, strict, and frightening.

While Lu Xiaofeng was still pondering on what he knew, trying to discover the origin of this 'Black Belt Society', Ding Xiangyi was back, she was back empty-handed.

"Have you delivered the box?"

"What did they say?"

"They did not say anything," Ding Xiangyi pouted, "Because actually they were not in, so I handed the box over to their attendant!"

"And the attendant also does not know where they are?"

Ding Xiangyi shook her head. Suddenly she sneered and said, "I don't care where you sent the box, that 'yin yang person' would come to find you!"

Lu Xiaofeng replied, "He won't come to find me!"

Ding Xiangyi: "Why?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because right now I am going to find him first!"

Ding Xiangyi was shocked. She was about to act like she was angry, but then her eyes showed concern as she asked, "Do you know how many people are in their group?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Seven."

Ding Xiangyi: "Do you know that those seven people have fourteen hands?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I can count as well!"

Ding Xiangyi: "But you have only one pair of hands!"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed before saying, "Does one tael of gold worth more? Or does one catty of iron worth more?"

Ding Xiangyi: "Of course the gold would worth more!"

Lu Xiaofeng said matter-of-factly, "Therefore, one pair of hands is sometimes more useful than fourteen hands!"

Ding Xiangyi looked as he was walking out. When he reached the door, she suddenly asked, "Are you confident that you are coming back?"

Lu Xiaofeng only laughed.

Ding Xiangyi: "How confident are you of coming back alive?"

Lu Xiaofeng could not bear not to turn his head and asked, "Why do you ask such a meticulous question?"

With a straight face Ding Xiangyi said coldly, "If even half a confidence you do not have, you'd better leave those banknotes in your pocket. If I am going to be a widow, at least I will be a rich widow!"

Lu Xiaofeng stared at her; he looked at her for half a day. Slowly he reached into his pocket, took the banknotes out and placed them on the table. Suddenly he laughed and said, "Don't worry, you will never be a widow!"

Ding Xiangyi: "Why?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because I can guarantee you that no man in this world would dare to take you as his wife."

Lu Xiaofeng had left. He left without even buttoning his collar, as if he was going out for a walk.

But why did he leave all those banknotes behind? Was it because he did not have full confidence that he was going to come back alive?

Just how frightening were people like that Yin Kid?

Ding Xiangyi stared at the banknotes on the table. Suddenly she sighed and muttered, "If you don't come back, although I won't be a widow, there will be someone who will be a widower."

Chapter 4 – Ocean of Vinegar*, Waves of Prosperity

*[Translator's note: vinegar is often used to symbolize jealousy]

The Lucky Inn's courtyard was surrounded by four building complexes. Yin Kid's party seemed to stay on the fourth complex. They seemed to rent the entire complex.

Just a moment ago Lu Xiaofeng seemed to hear the voices of women singing and laughing, but now the voices had ceased.

He walked around and entered the complex from the back door, and did not see even a single human being. Apparently this place was not enjoying good business.

Although the lanterns around the courtyard were lit, not even a sound of breathing or coughing was heard. Could it be that nobody was home?

Lu Xiaofeng stood on tiptoes and then leaped up the short wall. The lantern light shone through the window, but not a single shadow was to be seen.

There seemed to be a faint trace of the fragrance of women's cosmetic and the aroma of wine and meat in the courtyard. Apparently there was a joyous gathering in that courtyard not too long ago. When people gathered to have a good time, wine and women were never absent.

But where were the people now?

A breeze came. Lu Xiaofeng suddenly knitted his brows. The breeze brought the smell of not only the wine, meat and perfume, but also a very particular smell, a special odor that usually can be found only around the slaughter house.

He deliberately created some noise, but nothing was stirring in the room. While he was still hesitating, unsure whether he should just break into the room, suddenly he heard a miserably scream.

The scream was ear-piercingly sharp; it did not sound like a human being's voice.

If you insist that that was a human's voice, then this human certainly was a deformed monster.

Immediately Lu Xiaofeng remembered the 'lacking-half' person. Could it be that the Sui Han San You had beaten him again by one step?

He flitted across the roof ridge, his shadow floated like a light smoke. The scream came from the back, the two rooms at the very back. He could see the dim light far ahead. The two window panels and the door were actually half open.

The smell of the reeking of blood was getting thicker.

Lu Xiaofeng flew in and stopped right in front of the door. He gently pushed the door open with two fingers.

Immediately someone was laughing fiendishly inside the door, "You are really here. I knew that as soon as the box was delivered, you will come here. Come in, quick."

Lu Xiaofeng did not come in.

Not that he did not dare to come in, but he could not bear to come in.

The situation inside the room was a lot more horrible than the slaughter house, a lot more nauseating.

Three teenage girls, young girls who had not completely matured, like slaughtered white sheep were lying askew on the edge of the bed; their pale and slender bodies were still bleeding, with blood flowing through their tender legs, dripping to the floor.

The 'lacking half' person, like the grim reaper sat on the head of the bed. He raised a dagger in his hand, with blood still dripping from the blade.

"Come in!" his voice was sharp and ear-piercing like an owl in the night, "I tell you to come in, you must come in, otherwise I am going to cut these stinky three girls into eight pieces."

Lu Xiaofeng gritted his teeth, trying hard to stop vomiting; because vomiting can usually weaken one's body.

Yin Kid laughed fiendishly: "Although these three stinky girls do not have any relation with you, too bad you are known as a man who always

shows tender compassion, you can't bear to see them die in your presence!"

This malicious monster indeed knew how to capture Lu Xiaofeng's weakness; Lu Xiaofeng's heart had already sunken.

He indeed was not able to bear it.

His heart was not as hard as he wanted it to be. He knew perfectly well that sooner or later these girls could not avoid death, yet he still could not bear to see them die in his presence.

All he could do was to brace himself and step in.

Yin Kid laughed out loud: "At first we did not want to kill you, but you should not ..."

His laughter suddenly stopped; three cold rays of light flew in through the window. With the flashing of these rays, three star-like objects penetrated the young girls' throats.

The Yin Kid roared wildly and flew out instantly, but he did not pounce on Lu Xiaofeng at all, instead, he dashed out to pursue the person who launched the secret projectiles.

But Lu Xiaofeng was unwilling to let him go.

The young girls had already died, Lu Xiaofeng had nothing to risk, why

would he let him go?

The Yin Kid made a somersault in the air, the iron hook on his left arm grabbed the beam, and his body spun around the beam just like a spinning top. His fake leg created a strong gust of wind, turned out it was made of cast iron.

As soon as he executed this strange trick, anybody would have to give up any idea of coming close to him.

Lu Xiaofeng also could not come close, he had no choice but helplessly watch him spinning continuously. Suddenly his iron hook came loose. Borrowing the centrifugal force of the spin, his body shot out the window like an arrow.

Turned out he was not trying to score any victory, but was only hoping to escape. Obviously he realized he was not Lu Xiaofeng's match.

Too bad he still underestimated Lu Xiaofeng.

As his body flew, Lu Xiaofeng's hand suddenly reached up. With two fingers outstretched, he pushed lightly.

'Wham!' The Yin Kid was thrown heavily outside the window, his prosthetic leg struck the ground and sparks flew in all directions.

Lu Xiaofeng did not intend to kill him. With a lightning fast speed he simply sealed his acupoint with the intention of leaping out after him to interrogate his origin and the purpose of his trip.

Again a cold ray of light flashed in the courtyard and a nail pierced Yin Kid's throat.

"Who's there?"

The night was dim, the stars and the moon were not shining, not a single shadow was visible. Since he could not see anything, how could he pursue?

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "Luckily there were seven of them," he muttered, "There remain six living mouths."

He had just finished talking when suddenly from behind him came a cold voice, "It's a pity that now even half a living mouth is no more."

Only one person spoke, but there were three shadows on the ground, three long shadows because of the light from the window.

Sui Han San You.

Lu Xiaofeng slowly turned around. With a bitter smile he said, "So the other six people are no longer alive?"

One old man coldly said, "If they were still alive, you would not get out of that room that easily just a moment ago."

Presumably the other six people were setting up an ambush in the

darkness; so Lu Xiaofeng was actually walking into a trap. Pity that they all lost their lives silently in the dark.

Without a doubt these six people were martial art masters. Killing them all might not be too difficult but killing them all together silently was not an easy matter.

Sui Han San You's martial art skills were high, the way they made their moves was ruthless and accurate; truly astonishing.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and silently reminded himself that no matter what, he must not act blindly without thinking.

Surprisingly, this old man's hand was still holding a wine cup, and there were still wine inside the cup. Other than Mr. Gu Song [lit. lone pine (tree)] of Sui Han San You, how many people in the world would be able to kill people in an instant with only one hand?

Mr. Gu Song sipped the wine in his cup, then with a cold laugh he said, "Actually, we wanted to keep this half mouth alive. It's a pity that although you have the skill to kill, you don't have the ability to save."

"So it wasn't you just now?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Mr. Gu Song arrogantly said, "This kind of scrap copper and rusty iron, Lao Fu [old man, referring to self] has not touched for many, many years."

The secret projectile on Yin Kid's throat was a very elaborately manufactured three-corner bone-penetrating nail. The girls also died

under this kind of nails. In just a short period of time their faces turned black and their bodies started to shrink. It was obvious that the nails were dipped into some kind of throat-sealing violent poison.

Lu Xiaofeng also knew that this kind of secret projectiles could not possibly be used by the Sui Han San You. If one was capable of throwing a flower or a leaf to harm others by his internal energy, one could casually pick a pebble to strike down the enemy's arrow or flying dagger, one would not need to use such a poisonous secret projectile like this.

He simply needed to ask, because he really could not figure out who had acted so ruthlessly?

With a cold look Mr. Gu Song sized him up: "I have long heard that among the younger generation martial art experts, you are the most astute and the best, but I cannot see the least bit of that sign in you."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly laughed: "Sometimes when I looked into the mirror, I would feel disappointed in myself."

Mr. Gu Song: "Still, you'd better be more careful along the way, you need to take a better care of yourself."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because before I find your Luocha Tablet, I must not die."

Mr. Gu Song laughed coldly. With a flick of his long sleeve, 'Whoosh!' the trees around the courtyard swayed, autumn leaves fluttered, and the three of them disappeared.

Their qing gong had reached perfection, their temperament was extremely hard to deal with, whoever had these three as adversaries cannot possibly be too happy in his heart.

Lu Xiaofeng pinched a fallen leaf with his two fingers. He looked at the leaf and then let it fall again, while muttering, "The leaves have dried up. Two more days farther north, snow will start to fall. Those who are not afraid of cold are free to follow me."

The room was still lit.

When he left just a moment ago, the light was very bright. Right now it had dimmed quite a bit.

The door was half ajar, exactly like when he left a moment ago. Suddenly he asked the question he had never thought of before: "Is she still waiting for me?"

At first he was hoping that Ding Xiangyi would leave quickly; the sooner the better. But now? If she really had left, he would certainly not feel too good.

Regardless of what kind of person you are, when you know someone was waiting for you in your room, your heart will certainly grow warm. This feeling is similar to those of a lone hunter, when he returned home on a cold winter night and found out that someone has lighted the fire for him at home, then he would not feel lonely anymore.

Only an adventurer like Lu Xiaofeng can understand how precious this

kind of feeling can be. Therefore, when he pushed the door open, he was a bit nervous.

Right this moment, with this kind of feeling in his heart, he truly did not wish to walk into a cold and empty room.

Someone was inside, she had not left.

With her back facing the door, she sat next to the light, with her soft jet-black long hair hanging loosely on her shoulder.

She was slowly combing her hair with an ebony comb. Why is it that women always like to comb their hair to pass lonely time?

Seeing her, Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt the light was a lot brighter.

No matter who you are, you would feel better when you know someone was there for you. Suddenly he realized that the older he got, the more unbearable loneliness was to him.

However, he did not show the feeling in his heart; he said lightly instead, "At last I am back alive."

"Mmm," she did not turn her head.

Lu Xiaofeng: "I am not dead, and you haven't left. Looks like it is not time for the two of us to bid goodbye yet."

She still did not turn her head, but saying gently, "Do you wish I will never leave you forever?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not answer, because he suddenly realized the woman who sat in his room combing her hair was not Ding Xiangyi at all.

She seemed to be smiling coldly, the hand that hold the comb was so white that it looked almost transparent, her fingernails were very long.

She was still combing her hair, she was combing hard, as if she wanted to take her own hair to vent her anger.

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes shone. "It's you?" his voice hoarse.

She was laughing coldly, "You did not think it was me?"

Lu Xiaofeng admitted, "I really did not think it was you."

"I also did not think that you are such a lover, see one woman love one woman."

At last she turned her head. Her face pale, her nose straight, her eyes shone like the cold stars in the autumn night.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. With a bitter smile he said, "This time I don't want to climb an iceberg, but the iceberg actually wants to climb me?"

If Fang Yuxiang was really an iceberg, then there comes a time when an iceberg can also blush.

Right now her face was red, with her big eyes she hatefully stared at Lu Xiaofeng. "Is it true that you are not capable of speaking like a human being?"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled: "Once in a while I am capable of speaking one or two sentences. But it is only when I see a human being."

"So you think I am not a human being?" Naturally these words were not spoken, but her big eyes grew even bigger as she stared at Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled. "A couple of days ago I heard someone said that although your appearance looks mean, actually you are a very warm-hearted person. Too bad that try as I might, I fail to see it."

Fang Yuxiang: "Someone said I am a very warm-hearted person?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Uh huh."

Fang Yuxiang: "Who was it?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I am sure you know."

With a cold laugh Fang Yuxiang said, "Isn't she the full-of-affection little biaomei [younger female cousin] of mine, Ding Xiangyi?"

Lu Xiaofeng coughed lightly twice in reply; suddenly he felt that his face was blushing a little bit.

He always thought his heart was not too black, his face was also not too thick; as soon as the content of his heart was revealed, he would blush a little bit.

Fang Yuxiang coldly looked at him. "These last two days, she was always with you, I presume?" she asked.

Lu Xiaofeng could only admit.

Fang Yuxiang: "Where is she now?"

Lu Xiaofeng was startled. "You don't know where she is?"

Fang Yuxiang: "I have just got here, how would I know?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed: "Perhaps she was afraid when I come back I would turn into a freak who lacks a nose and lost an eye. She could not bear to see me like that, so she decided to walk away."

Fang Yuxiang coldly said, "She is indeed a soft-hearted woman, she always shut her eyes when she kills people."

Suddenly from outside came a giggle. "Of course Da Biaojie [elder female cousin] understands me best. Because the last time killing someone I closed my eyes, blood spattered all over my body."

Amidst the silver bell like laughter, like a swallow Ding Xiangyi flew in gracefully.

Although her laughter was delightful, her appearance was actually a bit distressing; even the front lapel of her gown was torn. She looked more like a swallow that has just been hit on the tail by a hunter's crossbow.

Fang Yuxiang's face was devoid of any feeling. "I didn't think you would come back."

Ding Xiangyi laughed. "Knowing Da Biaojie is here, I have no choice but to come back."

Fang Yuxiang also laughed. Her laughter was also very sweet. "Although sometimes I am mad at you, I also know that no matter what, you are still my good Biaomei, you are always good to me."

Ding Xiangyi: "It's a pity that the opportunity for us to see each other is not always many, you are always with Da Biaoge [older male cousin], leaving me all alone on my own."

Fang Yuxiang's smile was even sweeter: "Your words are so pleasant to hear, but don't you think that I do not know that you have already forgotten us long time ago."

Ding Xiangyi: "Who says that?"

Fang Yuxiang smiled while casting a glance toward Lu Xiaofeng. "When the two of you are intimate, do you still remember us?"

The two women were smiling sweetly, they both also spoke very pleasant words, but the more Lu Xiaofeng watched, the more he felt something was amiss.

Amidst the laughter as merry as silver bells, suddenly he heard 'Crack!' The comb in Fang Yuxiang's hand turned into a chain of swift arrows. One comb has at least forty, fifty teeth; just like a rainstorm these forty, fifty sharp arrows all flew toward Ding Xiangyi.

Ding Xiangyi's hand also suddenly launched seven cold rays of light, all flew toward the seven vital acupoints on the front of Fang Yuxiang's torso.

These two women made their moves together, unexpectedly both were launching fatal blows, each one wanted to take the other's life in this split second.

They both did not close their eyes, but Lu Xiaofeng did.

When he opened his eyes, he saw seven cold stars nailed on the wall in front of him, Fang Yuxiang was lying on the bed, and Ding Xiangyi had already flown seven, eight zhang away.

He heard her voice from the distant darkness, a voice filled with hatred: "Remember this: I will never forgive you!"

But before she even finished speaking, her voice had turned into a

scream. The scream was immediately cut short, replaced by an eerie silence.

The autumn fog had dispersed. The fog was noiseless. The wind was still blowing, but even the wind did not create any noise.

The whole earth was silent.

Fang Yuxiang was still lying motionless on the bed, so much so that her breathing was not heard.

Lu Xiaofeng sat down. He looked at her breast.

A very mature and firm pair of breasts.

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng laughed: "I know you are not dead yet."

A dead person's breast would not be as enticing as her breast, but like a dead person, she did not show any reaction.

Lu Xiaofeng stared at her for half a day. Suddenly he stood up, walked over, and lay down by her side.

And then he also turned into a dead person, while the other dead person actually started to revive.

Her hand was moving, her leg was also moving.

Lu Xiaofeng was motionless. Fang Yuxiang suddenly guffawed. "I know you also are not dead yet."

Finally Lu Xiaofeng showed some reaction. He grabbed Fang Yuxiang's constantly moving hand.

Fang Yuxiang: "What are you afraid of? I am not Blue Beard's legally married wife; you are not his friend."

She laughed again: "Don't tell me you are scared of Ding Xiangyi? I guarantee she won't be coming back this time."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. He knew that if Ding Xiangyi managed to come back this time, she might really turn into a freak who lacks a nose and lost an eye.

But he was not too concerned about it, because he noticed that the seven stars nailed onto the wall were precisely the tree-corner bone-penetrating nails he saw earlier.

He suddenly asked, "Did she come to find me on your order?"

Fang Yuxiang: "I have neither enmity nor grudges against you; why would I want to harm you?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Harm me?"

Fang Yuxiang: "Right now she is like a volcano which might erupt anytime. No matter who she is following, that person may die under her hands anytime."

With a bitter smile Lu Xiaofeng said, "Looks like my luck recently is not too bad. I met two women, one is an iceberg, the other is a volcano."

Fang Yuxiang: "Volcanoes are a lot more dangerous than icebergs, especially a volcano who hides three hundred taels of gold on her."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Three hundred taels of gold? Where did she get that much gold from?"

Fang Yuxiang: "She stole it."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What sort of place has that much gold for her to steal from?"

Fang Yuxiang: "Black Tiger Hall's treasury."

Lu Xiaofeng exhaled slowly. "Black Tiger Hall, black linen belt ...," he muttered.

Fang Yuxiang: "That's right, all of the Black Tiger Hall's various section leaders [orig. 'xiang zhu', lit. fragrance/incense host/master, and 'duo zhu', lit. helmsman. I do not know how to translate these two titles properly, so I refer to them as 'leaders'.] wear black linen belts."

Although the Black Tiger Hall was a new organization within the Jianghu, their organization was tight and their influence was enormous. Some said that it had already surpassed the Green Shirt Pavilion of the former days. It was backed by strong and solid financial resources that even the Beggar Clan and the Diancang Sect could not compete.

The Beggar Clan has always been the biggest clan of the Jianghu, while Diancang's disciples were all of rich families; plus there was a gold mine on the Diancang mountain. Therefore, these two organizations have always been the richest.

But Black Tiger Hall was actually richer.

Money will make the Devil turn millstones, they say. The main reason the Black Tiger Hall was able to rise so rapidly was exactly because of its riches.

Lu Xiaofeng: "They say the Black Tiger Hall is fearsome because it has too much money. Naturally the defense of their treasury is very strict."

Fang Yuxiang: "I believe so."

Lu Xiaofeng: "These last couple of days I found out that the number of martial art masters who work for Black Tiger Hall is a lot more than I imagined. What ability does Ding Xiangyi have that she was able to empty their treasury?"

Fang Yuxiang: "Her ability might be superficial, but whatever little ability she has is enough."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

Fang Yuxiang: "Who is the Hall Leader of Black Tiger Hall?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Flying Jade Tiger." [orig. 'Fei Tian Yu Hu', lit. jade tiger flying to the sky]

Fang Yuxiang: "She is Fei Tian Yu Hu's wife."

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked.

Fang Yuxiang: "I heard when Fei Tian Yu Hu was not home recently, Ding Xiangyi seized the opportunity to clean up the Black Tiger Hall's treasury and eloped with one of Fei Tian Yu Hu's pageboys."

She laughed, and then continued, "Actually, you shouldn't be surprised. She is not the first, and definitely won't be the last of women who steal their husbands' valuables and elope with a 'little white face' [see my previous note in Chapter 3]."

Finally Lu Xiaofeng sighed: "Looks like this 'little white face's ability is not to be trifled with; he was able to make her brave this kind of danger."

Fang Yuxiang laughed: "Are you jealous?" [orig. 'eat (or drink) vinegar']

With a straight face Lu Xiaofeng said coldly, "I just want to see what kind of man he is, that's all."

Fang Yuxiang: "Too bad you will never see him now."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why?"

Fang Yuxiang: "Because he has been chopped into eight pieces by the Five Warriors of Liao Clan, stuffed in a box and shipped back to the Black Tiger Hall."

The Five Warriors of Liao Clan must be the five men who followed him earlier.

Now Lu Xiaofeng understood, they were not following him at all, but tailing Ding Xiangyi.

Fang Yuxiang: "After the 'little white face' was dead, she realized that the Black Tiger Hall was hot in pursuit. Only then did she get scared, therefore ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Therefore, she looked for me."

Fang Yuxiang: "Everybody in Jianghu knows that the Four-eyebrowed Lu Xiaofeng is not someone to be messed up with. Even the Emperor is his good friend. Even the Master of the White Cloud Castle and Yan Duhe have fallen under his hands. With an escort of this caliber, surely the Black Tiger Hall would not dare to act rashly."

Lu Xiaofeng: "But they did not know that I have three even fiercer

escorts protecting me in secret."

Fang Yuxiang: "That's why out of the thirteen people who came, twelve have already died."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Who is the last one?"

Fang Yuxiang: "Fei Tian Yu Hu."

Lu Xiaofeng's countenance changed. "He is also coming? Where is he?"

Fang Yuxiang: "He seemed to be outside a moment ago. I think he must be going home now."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why?"

Fang Yuxiang: "Because he must have found the person he was looking for. In handling his business, he always draws a clear line between gratitude and grudges. He knew that you are merely a puppet exploited by Ding Xiangyi. Therefore, he will not come looking for you."

Lu Xiaofeng coldly said, "Therefore, I should feel relieved, because Fei Tian Yu Hu's martial art skill is simply too high, his ability is so awesome that if he comes looking for me, I will definitely die."

Fang Yuxiang sweetly said, "I have no doubt that you are not afraid of him, but it's always best to avoid this kind of troublesome issue."

Lu Xiaofeng turned his head around to look at her. Suddenly he asked, "Probably Ding Xiangyi's knowledge of Black Tiger Hall is not any clearer than yours."

Fang Yuxiang sighed: "To tell you the truth, I was the one who introduced her to him, consequently, when she offended him like this, I also am losing face."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Also because he did not marry you but married Ding Xiangyi instead, you were very angry and then went out to gamble everything you have, in the end you married the Blue Beard."

Fang Yuxiang nodded. She said softly, "That's why I do not have any emotional attachment toward the Blue Beard. In all honesty, I regret ever marrying someone who owns a gambling establishment like him."

It does not matter whether it was a man or a woman, when one is going through a heart-breaking experience, one would usually drink to drown one's sorrow or gamble to gain happiness, and then casually pick just anyone to be one's partner. But when one's head is clear afterwards, it usually is already too late to regret.

This is a tragic story, but also a very common one.

The man is too busy dealing with his business outside, the woman cannot bear the loneliness, and thus cheating with someone else, so much so that they eloped together.

This kind of affair is also very common.

Ding Xiangyi was afraid Lu Xiaofeng would pay no attention to her if he knew the truth; hence she did not give the Yin Kid any opportunity to speak, and thus she took the initiative to strike the first blow to silence the witness.

Seeing Fang Yuxiang had arrived, originally she wanted to slip out unnoticed; but as soon as she went out, she discovered Fei Tian Yu Hu's trail. Without any better option, she was forced to return to the room. Unfortunately, Fang Yuxiang forced her out again.

There was a very plausible answer to each of his questions. But Lu Xiaofeng was still not satisfied. For some reason he always felt that there was a conspiracy in the midst of all these, a secret he was not able to penetrate.

"They say Fei Tian Yu Hu is a very mysterious character; he has never revealed his true identity."

A leader of a secret organization must always maintain his mystery, only then can he live quite a long life.

Lu Xiaofeng: "But you are an exception, you must have seen him."

Fang Yuxiang concurred. "I have seen him many times."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Actually, what kind of person is he?"

Fang Yuxiang: "Lately, many people believe the Jianghu's two most mysterious personalities, the two most fearsome people, are the Two Jades of the North and West."

The west had a Jade, the north also had a Jade. Bumping into these two Jades, the game was as good as lost. [Translator's note: the character 'yu' in both 'Yu Luocha' and 'Fei Tian Yu Hu' means 'jade'.]

Fang Yuxiang: "Since he shares the same reputation as the Western Region's Yu Luocha, he must be similarly vicious and ruthless, a similarly astute and fierce character."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What does he look like?"

Fang Yuxiang: "Although he is more than forty years old, he looks about thirty-six, thirty-seven years old. His stature is short and small, his eyes look like a hunting hawk."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What is his surname? What is his name?"

Fang Yuxiang: "I don't know."

Lu Xiaofeng: "You don't know?"

Fang Yuxiang: "Perhaps he has a very bitter past that he has never revealed his real name and origin in front of others. I am no exception."

Her hand suddenly started moving again.

Lu Xiaofeng was still motionless.

In a tender voice Fang Yuxiang said, "Now that you know everything, what are you afraid of?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not respond.

Fang Yuxiang: "The night is very deep, the wind outside is also very strong, are you cruel enough to drive me out?"

Her voice was sultry, full of passion, her hand was even more stimulating.

Finally Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "Of course I won't drive you out, but I ..."

Fang Yuxiang: "But you what?"

Lu Xiaofeng stopped her hand, "I only want to clarify one thing."

Fang Yuxiang: "What matter?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Ding Xiangyi came to me because she wanted to use me as her shield. What about you?"

Fang Yuxiang: "Do you think I am here to exploit you as well?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed: "I truly wish you came here because you had a liking for me. Too bad I would still not believe it even after I drank thirty catties of wine."

Fang Yixiang: "Because you know you are not someone who thinks himself to be a gift to women?"

With a bitter smile Lu Xiaofeng replied, "I was, in the past; and that is the reason I still live even today. It truly is not easy."

Fang Yuxiang also sighed. "If you must know the truth, I will tell you the truth. I came here to strike a business deal with you."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What business deal?"

Fang Yuxiang: "I want to trade your Luocho Tablet with my body. I will give you my body first then when you get the Luocho Tablet, you must give it to me."

She laughed, then continued, "I am the Blue Beard's wife, if after finding the Luocho Tablet you give it to me, you can be considered successful in your mission, hence you won't suffer the least bit of loss."

Lu Xiaofeng: "And if I cannot find it?"

Fang Yuxiang: "That's a risk I am willing to take. I will not blame you at all."

Her voice was even sultrier, even more passionate: "The night is already this deep, the wind outside is so strong, in any case I do not dare to go out."

Unexpectedly he did indeed stand up and walked out the door without turning his head. Suddenly a 'Crack! Bang!' was heard, the spacious and sturdy wooden bed collapsed.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

Hearing Fang Yuxiang cursing and swearing, his laughter was even more cheerful. "You prevent me from having a good night's sleep, I won't let you have a good night's sleep as well."

He was not a sage, nor a gentleman.

Fortunately, he was Lu Xiaofeng, the one and only Lu Xiaofeng.

Who can imagine where he would sleep tonight?

He slept on the roof. Hence by the time he woke up the next morning, he was almost dry blown by the wind, blown until he turned into a 'wind chicken' [not sure, orig. 風雞 Can anybody tell me what a 'wind chicken' is?].

Apparently someone sometime should think oneself to be a gift to women so that one would sometimes enjoy better days.

He sighed and strained to stretch his body really well before he was able to move his hands and feet. Luckily Fang Yuxiang had left. Nobody would be able to spend the night on a shattered bed.

Nobody would want to go up the roof to vent her anger to him, therefore, she unleashed her rage on his clothes.

When he wanted to change clothes, he found out that all his clothes had been torn to pieces. Except one long robe, on which someone had written these characters using the rouge Ding Xiangyi had left behind: "Lu Xiaofeng, your guts is smaller than that of a chicken; why don't you change your name to Lu Xiaoji?" [Translator's note: 'Xiaofeng' - Little Phoenix, 'Xiaoji' - Little Chicken.]

Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

"Even if I am a chicken, I won't be a 'little chicken'." Feeling his blown-dried face he said, "At least I should be a 'wind chicken'." Wind chicken was very nourishing.

Other than wind chicken, there was a dish of cured meat, a dish of scrambled eggs, and a dish of cucumber pickled in soy sauce.

Lu Xiaofeng drank four large bowls of sweet smelling and hot sticky rice porridge before he finally put his chopsticks down. Although he was a bit sore all over his body, his heart was very happy.

It was a pity that his happiness has always been short-lived.

He was about to order the fifth bowl of porridge when someone coming from the outside delivered a letter for him.

The stationery was very exquisite, the handwriting was also very delicate. "Has that troublesome fox left yet? I do not dare to call on you. Do you dare to call on me? If you don't, you are a grandson of the turtle."

Lu Xiaofeng recognized the courier as the inn's attendant. From the tone of the letter, Lu Xiaofeng also recognized it as Ding Xiangyi's.

So she had not died yet?

"This Miss Ding is the same Miss Ding who came in with Mister Guest yesterday."

Indeed she had not died yet.

Immediately Lu Xiaofeng forgot all the soreness on his body, just like someone who suddenly hears the singing of the 'Tan Appeals to the Heaven' opera outside. He sprang up instantly, "Where is she? Take me to her, quick! If I don't go, I am the grandson of a turtle's grandson."

The door was unlocked.

Pushing the door open, he smelled a scent even sweeter than the osmanthus flowers.

There were no osmanthus flowers inside the room, but there was someone, someone who was lying on the bed.

It was not the first time Lu Xiaofeng smelled this kind of fragrance. It was precisely the scent of Ding Xiangyi's body.

Ding Xiangyi was indeed very fragrant.

The person lying on the bed was indeed a very fragrant person.

The sunlight streamed in through the window. The room was serene and elegant, making one's heart full with joyful and warm feeling.

She was lying on a spacious soft bed, covered in cotton quilt embroidered with a pair of mandarin ducks playing on the water.

Scarlet quilt, emerald-green mandarin ducks, her face captivating pink, her jet-black hair shiny; obviously she had just finished grooming herself.

The woman was pleased and ready, she was waiting for him.

Lu Xiaofeng felt warmth creep into his heart again, but he deliberately maintained a straight face as he said, "Why do you want me to come? Are you going to return those fifty-thousand taels of silver banknotes to me?"

Ding Xiangyi also deliberately closed her eyes and ignored him.

Lu Xiaofeng sneered: "If one already has three-hundred thousand taels of gold, why would one want to take fifty-thousand taels of silver?"

Ding Xiangyi still did not pay him any attention, but from her tightly shut eyes two streams of tears suddenly flowed down.

Crystal clear tears, flowing slowly along her captivating pink cheeks, just like dew on the petals of a rose.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart softened again. He slowly walked over. He was thinking of saying some rather gentle words.

He had not said anything. Because suddenly he realized something strange – Ding Xiangyi's body seemed to be a little bit shorter. The lower part of the quilt seemed to be empty.

Why?

Lu Xiaofeng did not even dare to think. He grabbed the corner of the cotton quilt embroidered with a pair of mandarin ducks playing on the water and raised it up. Suddenly he felt as if he sank into cold water. His body, from top to bottom, was ice-cold.

Ding Xiangyi was still fragrant, she was still pretty, her breasts were still full and tender, her waist was still soft and slender, but her pair of hands, her pair of feet, had disappeared!

The sunlight was still streaming in through the window, but the warm bright sunlight had turned more dazzling than the tip of a sharp needle.

Lu Xiaofeng closed his eyes; immediately he saw a thin small face with eyes like a hawk, filled with malicious hatred. The face was grinning fiendishly at Ding Xiangyi, as if he was saying, "I cut off your hands, I want to see if you still dare to steal my gold. I cut off your feet, I want to see where can you run?"

Lu Xiaofeng clenched his fists, tight.

A man has every right to get his eloped wife back. He did not resent Fei Tian Hu Yu for this. When he knew Ding Xiangyi was captured, he only felt sourness and sadness, nothing more.

But this was a different story.

Nobody has any right to harm others. He abhorred violence, just like farmers hate locusts.

When he opened his eyes, he found out that Ding Xiangyi was looking at him. She had been looking at him for a while.

Her eyes did not contain any anger, only sadness. All of a sudden she softly uttered two words, "Go away!"

Originally she wanted him to come; now that they have met, why did she want him to go away? Was it because she did not want him to see her wretched condition? Or was she afraid Fei Tian Yu Hu would return unexpectedly?

Perhaps she wrote the short note under Fei Tian Yu Hu's coercion. Perhaps it was a trap.

Lu Xiaofeng gently set the quilt down. He pulled a chair and he sat by her bed. Although not a single word came out of his mouth, his meaning was loud and clear: "I will not go away."

It did not matter the reason she wanted him to go away, he was determined to stay, to keep her company.

Because he knew that this time was definitely a time when she needed company the most. When he was lonely, didn't she also come to keep him company?

Lu Xiaofeng was not a narrow-minded person. Although others had wronged him, he would quickly forget those offenses.

He preferred to remember only other people's kindness.

Obviously Ding Xiangyi also understood his intention. Other than sadness, now her eyes were brimming with unspoken gratitude. "Now I am sure you know my story." Her voice was so low, as if she was afraid others would hear her. "Obviously I have no way of taking those three hundred thousand taels of gold everywhere with me. In order to force me to reveal the whereabouts of the gold, he tortured me like this."

"And now certainly you have returned the gold to him; but why did you wait until he tortured you like this before you were willing to return it to him? Those gold were his to begin with, you should return it to him."

Lu Xiaofeng's mouth stayed shut; of course he did not utter these thoughts. In reality he could not bear to hurt her anymore.

The wind was blowing outside the window; one by one the falling leaves hit the shutters like a weary hand fiddled a zither bow, grating it across a rough tangerine-peel surface. Although it created a sound, it was a very distressing sound.

What should he say now? Any consolation would be unnecessary, because whatever comforting words he was trying to say, she would not be comforted.

After a long distressing silence she suddenly asked, "Do you know why I stole those three-hundred thousand taels of gold?"

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head, he could only pretend he did not know.

But Ding Xiangyi's explanation was beyond his expectation. "It was also because of that Luocha Tablet."

It was not a good explanation, that's why it did not sound like a lie.

Ding Xiangyi: "I know Li Xia took the Luocha Tablet. I also know that she has returned to Lao Wu [lit. old house]."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Lao Wu?"

Ding Xiangyi: "Lao Wu is Rahasu. Rahasu is the local dialect, it means the Old House."

Lu Xiaofeng: "You know Li Xia?"

Ding Xiangyi nodded. Her face suddenly showed a very strange expression. After hesitating for a long time she softly said, "She is actually my stepmother."

This reply was even more beyond Lu Xiaofeng's expectation; she explained further, "Before Li Xia married the Blue Beard, she was my father's wife."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Your father ...?"

Ding Xiangyi: "He is dead now. But Li Xia and I still keep in touch with each other."

Li Xia was her stepmother, Fang Yuxiang was her older cousin. Her cousin had actually snatched her stepmother's husband, and her cousin actually introduced her to her current husband.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly realized that these three women had a very complex relation with each other. If she did not tell him, he would have never guessed it.

Ding Xiangyi could see through his mind; she said mournfully, "Women are weak; there are a lot of who women have fallen into very unfortunate situations, they are often forced to do things they were unwilling to do."

Not only men do not show the least understanding toward them, oftentimes men would also look down upon them."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "I ... I understand."

Ding Xiangyi: "This time, although what Li Xia did was wrong, I sympathize with her."

"She stole her husband's Luocha Tablet, you stole your husband's gold. What you did were the same, of course you sympathize with her."

Obviously Lu Xiaofeng did not say this thought out loud, but Ding Xiangyi could read his mind.

"I said she did something wrong, not because she stole the Luocha Tablet," it was the first time her expression revealed grief and indignation, "If a woman has been abandoned by her husband, whatever she did to retaliate is justifiable."

This is a woman's idea; most women will have this idea.

Ding Xiangyi was a woman.

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng could only express his agreement.

Ding Xiangyi: "I said she did something wrong, because she should not agree to sell the Luocha Tablet to Jia Leshan."

Lu Xiaofeng's countenance changed. "Jia Leshan of Jiangnan?"

He knew this man.

Jia Leshan was a well-known rich man from Jiangnan; he was also known locally as a benevolent warrior. Only a very small number of people knew that in the past he was a notorious pirate of the four seas that even more than half of 'wokou' [my dictionary says 'Japanese pirates of the 16th and 17th century'] of the eastern world [orig. Dong Yang - modern day Japan] was under his command.

The 'wokou' had always been known as bloody and cruel, vicious bandits, they were valiant and unafraid to die. Not only that, their natural disposition was capricious. The fact that Jia Leshan was able to subdue these people showed just how formidable and fierce he was.

Ding Xiangyi: "I know Li Xia has had a negotiation with Jia Leshan's secret envoy who was sent to the Central Plains, even the price has been agreed upon. The transaction will be conducted at Rahasu. Payment is cash on delivery."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Since they have reached an agreement in the Central Plains, why must the transaction be at the remote small town way up north?"

Ding Xiang Yi: "That is also one of Li Xia's conditions. She knew Jia Leshan is always vicious and ruthless. For fear that he would eat her alive, she insisted that the transaction must be done at Rahasu."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why?"

Ding Xiangyi: "Because that is my father's hometown. Also, she had lived there for ten years, she is very familiar with the people and the area. Even Jia Leshan would not dare to be reckless there."

Lu Xiaofeng: "It seems like she is an unusually astute and fierce woman."

Ding Xiangyi sighed: "She has no choice but be astute, because she has fallen into men's treachery too many times."

Lu Xiaofeng: "But she told you this secret anyway."

Ding Xiangyi: "Because right after she got hold of the Luochoa Tablet, the first person she looked for was me."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

Ding Xiangyi: "She also made a promise that if I could get two hundred thousands taels of gold by the end of the year, she would sell the Luochoa Tablet to me ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why do you want that Luochoa Tablet?"

Ding Xiangyi: "Because I want revenge."

Clenching her teeth, she continued, "I have known long ago that Fei

Tian Yu Hu has another woman, he has always considered me a hindrance; that woman obviously dislikes me even more. If I live a day longer, she could give up the idea to be Madame Clan Leader of the Black Tiger Hall forever."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Are you saying that they want to kill you?"

Ding Xiangyi: "If not for my vigilance, I am afraid I would have died under their hands long time ago. But if I have the Luochoa Tablet in my hand, they would not dare to deal with me."

If a woman is willing to spend two hundred thousand taels of gold on something, she must have a strong reason.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why?"

Ding Xiangyi: "Because if I have the Luochoa Tablet, that means I am the Cult Leader of the Luochoa Cult. Even Fei Tian Yu Hu cannot help not to have at least a third part of fear toward the Cult Leader of the Western Region's Demon Cult."

Her tired and sad eyes suddenly shone as she told a very astonishing secret:

The Western Region's Yu Luochoa was dead. He died suddenly as his son was entering the Great Wall.

"When my hundred years is over, whoever I pass on the Luochoa Tablet to, will become the next generation Jiaozhu of our Cult. Whoever defy this

order will have to suffer ten thousands cuts, will be dismembered by poisonous ants. After death will be imprisoned as a ghost and will not be redeemed for ten thousand years."

The Western Region's Yu Luochoa was certainly astute and fierce character. He was afraid after his death his disciples would massacre each other in their fight for power, and thus destroy the Cult he founded with his own hands.

Therefore, when he opened up the mountain to establish his school, the first thing he did was personally drawing up this demonic jade law.

Also because of this, he had already passed on the Luochoa Tablet to his son. Too bad that Yu Tianbao was no different from children of affluent and wealthy families, he was a spoiled brat, the black sheep of the family.

Ding Xiangyi: "If Yu Luochoa knew that his precious son has pawned the Luochoa Tablet, even in the netherworld he would certainly vomit blood in anger."

Lu Xiaofeng exhaled slowly. Now he finally understood why there were so many people fighting with everything they got over the Luochoa Tablet.

"For the purpose of holding a memorial for Yu Luochoa, and also inaugurating the new Jiaozhu, the Law Protecting Elders and various leaders within the Cult have decided that on the seventh of the first month next year, all important disciples will gather together on the Great Brightness Mirror of the Kunlun Mountains."

"And if on that day you manage to bring the Luocho Tablet to that place, you will become the new Jiaozhu of the Devil Cult. From now on, absolutely nobody will dare to mess with you."

The Western Region's Devil Cult not only possessed such a deeply rooted power and influence, their disciples were spread all over the world. Whoever became the next Cult Leader would immediately turn into the most influential character in Jianghu. With power and influence, naturally fame and riches would follow.

No matter who you are, you would find this kind of enticement nearly impossible to resist.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. He suddenly realized that this matter had become increasingly complex, and his mission was also getting more and more difficult.

But there was something he did not understand: "Why won't Li Xia personally take the Luocho Tablet to the Kunlun Mountains?"

Ding Xiangyi: "Because she is afraid that she would die along the way before she reaches the Kunlun Mountains. She is even more afraid that she would not live to see the seventh of the first month next year."

Before the seventh of the first month next year, regardless of who had it, this Luocho Tablet would be like a bomb, which could go off anytime, frying the holder into a torn body and crushed bones.

Ding Xiangyi: "She has always been an astute woman; she knew the

safest option would be to sell it to other people."

She sighed before continuing, "A woman her age, who does not have anybody to lean on, whose spirit is always restless, would usually do everything she could to make more money, therefore ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Therefore, although you have a special relationship with you, she still wants you to pay her the two hundred thousand taels of gold."

Ding Xiangyi grimly said, "It's a pity that my condition right now is more wretched than hers. I really don't have anything left in me."

Forcing a laugh, Lu Xiaofeng said, "At least you still have a friend."

Ding Xiangyi: "You?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. Suddenly he felt an unexplainable feeling bubbling up in his heart. Originally they were not 'friends', but their relationship was actually closer than friends. Yet now...

Ding Xiangyi looked at him. Her eyes revealed an unspeakable emotion. Who can say if it was sadness? Comfort? Or was it gratitude?

After a long time, she suddenly asked, "Can you promise me a favor?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Tell me."

Ding Xiangyi: "Now, even a LuoCha Tablet is useless for me, but I still wish to be able to see it, because ... because I have sacrificed everything for it. If I cannot even look at it, I will not die peacefully."

Lu Xiaofeng: "So after I find it, you want me to bring it here and show it to you?"

Ding Xiangyi nodded, her gaze was fixed on him. "Will you promise?"

How could Lu Xiaofeng not promise?

"But it will take me at least a month; will you still be here at that time?"

"I will," Ding Xiangyi was suddenly mournful, "Now I am no more than just a trash. It doesn't matter if I live or if I die, they will not pay me anymore attention."

Her eyes turned red, and tears started to stream down. "Besides, for somebody like me, where else there is go?"

The moon was gradually rising, outside was getting more quiet, the guests who should have hit the road have already left.

Lu Xiaofeng gently wiped the tears on Ding Xiangyi's face with his sleeve then he sat back down.

After another long pause, she sighed gently and said, "You should also go."

Lu Xiaofeng: "You want me to go?"

Ding Xiangyi laughed: "Certainly you cannot stay here with me forever?"

Although she was laughing, her expression was actually more forlorn than when she was crying.

Lu Xiaofeng was about to speak, but he stopped.

Ding Xiangyi: "Do you want to say something?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. There was something he originally thought he should not ask, because he did not want to rub salt into her wound; on this matter, however, he had no choice but to ask: "What kind of man is Fei Tian Yu Hu, actually?"

Ding Xiangyi's answer was the same as Fang Yuxiang's. To his surprise, even she did not know Fei Tian Yu Hu's actual name. His life experiences stayed secret, his actions were unpredictable, his stature was thin and small, his eyes like a hawk. He would never trust anybody, his own wife was no exception. But his martial art skill was definitely very high, all throughout his life he had never met any who could be his match.

The above points were the known facts.

Lu Xiaofeng could not help but ask, "What kind of place is Rahasu?"

Ding Xiangyi: "That place is just like Fei Tian Yu Hu, mysterious and frightening. The locals are usually narrow-minded, often show hostility towards foreigners and newcomers. Other than two people, it is best if you do not believe whatever anybody else is saying."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Who are these two people I can trust?"

Ding Xiangyi: "One is called Lao Shanyang [lit. old mountain goat]; he was my father's old business partner. The other is Chen Jingjing, she grew up with me. If they knew you are a friend of mine, they would certainly spare no effort in helping you."

Lu Xiaofeng committed these two names into his memory.

Ding Xiangyi: "Right after the Mid-autumn Festival [15th day of the 8th month of Lunar Calendar], the weather turns cold, day in and day out. By the middle of the tenth month, the river freezes."

Lu Xiaofeng had also heard that once the Songhua River turned into ice, it became a strip of a flat and vast main street.

Ding Xiangyi: "People who have never been there will have no idea how cold that place actually is. On the coldest days, the snoot flowing down from your nose will freeze into ice, even the breath from your mouth will become particles of ice."

Lu Xiaofeng groaned inwardly, without realizing it he pulled his collar higher.

Ding Xiangyi: "I know you are a Jiangnan person, so you must be very sensitive to cold weather. Therefore you'd better leave as soon as possible before the weather turns really cold. It's best that when you are outside the Great Wall, you buy a fur-lined coat to protect you against the cold first."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt warm again. Regardless of what had happened, she cared about him after all.

Knowing that somebody in this world cares about you is always a pleasing matter.

But he still had one matter he must ascertain.

After hesitating a moment he asked, "With the death of Yu Luochoa, inside the Devil Cult there must be some unavoidable turmoil. His death must be kept a secret until today to prevent outside forces from entering by exploiting their weakness."

"Not too many people knew about this secret," Ding Xiangyi agreed.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Then how did you find out?"

Ding Xiangyi: "In the Black Tiger Hall, there are three sections: White Pigeon, Grey Wolf and Yellow Dog ..."

The Yellow Dog's responsibility is to trace and pursue. The Grey Wolf's

mission is to fight and kill. The White Pigeon's task is to gather and distribute information.

The Black Tiger Hall's rapid rise could be attributed in part to these three highly efficient and well-managed major sections.

Nearly all famous characters of the Jianghu; their lives' stories, their appearances, martial art skills and origin, as well as personal strengths and weaknesses, including their hobbies and indulgences, were all documented properly in the White Pigeon section.

"That's why before I even saw you, I already know what kind of person you are," Ding Xiangyi concluded.

Was it because she knew he had a weakness against women, so she came to him to make him her shield?

Lu Xiaofeng did not want to think about this aspect. Others wronged him, he did not want to think too much about it. That was the reason he was able to maintain a bright, cheerful and open-minded attitude.

Ding Xiangyi laughed suddenly, a forlorn and bitter laugh. "Actually, I used to occupy two positions in the Black Tiger Hall."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

Ding Xiangyi: "Not only I was the Hall Leader's punch bag, I was also the Head of the White Dove Section."

Finally Lu Xiaofeng left.

Ding Xiangyi was right, certainly he could not accompany her in this place for the rest of their lives.

The weather was still very clear. The sun was still shining with the same brightness. But his mood was actually not as cheerful as only a moment ago.

His mind was burdened with his mission, which was growing in complexity and difficulty. Thinking about how he was implicated in all these troublesome matters, he wished he could just jump into the river.

The courtyard was full of falling leaves. Amidst the continuously falling autumn leaves, a girl of thirteen, fourteen was standing alone underneath a tree, as if she was going to be swept away by the autumn wind any minute.

She had a letter in her hand. Her frightened eyes were looking at Lu Xiaofeng, from top to bottom.

Lu Xiaofeng came over to her and smiled suddenly. "Are you waiting for me?"

The girl was startled; she pressed her back closer to the tree. With a frightened voice she stammered, "Are you ... are you that Four-Eyebrowed Lu Xiaofeng?"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled. "I am Lu Xiaofeng. Who are you?"

The girl replied, "I am Qiu Ping." [lit. autumn duckweed]

Looking at her frail stature and timid appearance, perhaps her life story was as sad as floating duckweed.

Women are weak creatures. Too many girls have a tragic life story, encountering a very pitiful experience.

But isn't this world a man's world?

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. With a gentle voice he said, "Didn't Fei Tian Yu Hu tell you to come?"

Qiu Ping nodded.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Didn't he want you to give this letter to me?"

Qiu Ping nodded again. Holding the letter with her pair of pale hands, she gave it to Lu Xiaofeng.

The stationery and the ink were of a top quality, the handwriting was also surprisingly very elegant.

To Mr. Xiaofeng:

Mister is a great hero of this age, an absolutely extraordinary man, Di [younger brother, referring to self] has long admired you, it is a great regret that I fail to make a personal acquaintance with you. About my wife Xiangyi, since she has already been bequeathed by Mister's kind affection, Di can only give up my treasure and offer her to you, as a token of my meager appreciation, wishing Mister would kindly accept.

Another day, when we are destined to meet, there will be food and wine at the Green Plum Pavilion, where Mister and I will commune and drink for ten days.

Also, the board and lodging expenses of this place, Di has paid in full until the end of the month. Enclosed please find the receipt from the Inn, please accept accordingly.

In addition, here is the divorce certificate of my wife to clear all formalities, please also accept accordingly.

The signature underneath was indeed Fei Tian Yu Hu.

Suppressing his anger, Lu Xiaofeng read the letter until the end. Suddenly he discovered that his self-cultivation had made some progress, he did not tear the letter away.

Qiu Ping was still standing there, her pair of big eyes was still scrutinizing his face. She seemed to be very interested in this four-eyebrowed handsome man.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled: "Are you waiting for my reply?"

Qiu Ping nodded. Fei Tian Yu Hu naturally wanted to know very much how would Lu Xiaofeng respond after reading his letter? How was his expression?

Lu Xiaofeng: "Go and tell him that I very much appreciate his gift, and thus I also want to give something to him."

Qiu Ping: "Do you want me to deliver it back to him?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You have no way of bringing it back; he must personally come and get it from me."

Qiu Ping seemed to be afraid. "But... "

Lu Xiaofeng: "But there is no harm in me telling you what kind of gift I prepare for him, so you can go back and tell him."

Qiu Ping relaxed. "What do you prepare for him?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I want to give him an a\$\$h01e." [Translator's note: I am not sure about this, the original was 屁眼, pi yan, pi – fart, yan – eye (or classifier for big hollow things)]

Qiu Ping was startled.

She did not understand. She wanted to ask, but she did not dare to ask. She wanted to laugh, but she did not dare to laugh.

Lu Xiaofeng did not laugh. "I want to give him an a\$\$h01e on his nose."

Chapter 5 – Suddenly Acquiring Ill-gotten Gains

‘Cursing people’ is definitely not something you recommend to others, but it is definitely something that always has a good reason behind it. Anybody who has just spontaneously cursed somebody who he hates most will certainly cheer up, his mood will be happy, just like someone who has had constipation for several days and suddenly he can go freely.

Too bad that Lu Xiaofeng had never been able to maintain this kind of happy mood for too long.

Leaving the inn, he walked in big strides along a dusty road, with yellow sand billowing in the distance. But before he even covered half a li, he suddenly discovered two things that would extremely displease him.

Other than the Sui Han San You and himself, he did not see any other traveler nearby, no more people were following behind him.

Other than a little bit of spare change, which he prepared for tips, not even a wen adorned his pocket.

He always liked company, he liked to see all kinds of people bustling around him. He did not care even if he knew that some of those people bore malicious intentions against him.

Isn't ‘poverty’ also a loneliness of some kind? Why is it that loneliness always follows poverty?

When you are rich, it is so easy for you to chase loneliness away. But when you are penniless, you will find that loneliness is just like your own shadow, even if you whip it, it would not go away.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. For the first time he realized that the wind blowing straight to his face was really cold.

At lunch Lu Xiaofeng only ate a bowl of sheep's innards soup and a couple of bread rolls. Those three old freaks were actually ordering four catties of choice cut mutton, five or six stir-fried dishes, and seven, eight fresh wheat steamed buns, plus several pots of wine.

Lu Xiaofeng really wanted to go over and tell them: "You old men eat too much of greasy food, your bellies must be hurting."

Since the meal was not enjoyable, he should have not left any tip. Too bad that when somebody was used to be a big boss, the big boss attitude could not change even when they had fallen into the bottom of the pot.

Therefore, after paying the bill, the amount of money in his pocket reached a pathetic stage.

Rahasu was still very far on the horizon. He could not steal, he could not swindle some money, it was even less possible for him to beg. If it were someone else in his place, there is no way that person would have continued walking this road.

Fortunately Lu Xiaofeng was not someone else.

Lu Xiaofeng was Lu Xiaofeng. No matter what difficulty he encountered, he always seemed to find a solution.

When the dusk fell, the wind was blowing colder; the road was devoid of any travelers.

With his hands behind his back, Lu Xiaofeng walked leisurely, as if he had just finished a very satisfying meal and had enjoyed good wine, and right now he was strolling along the busiest street in Beijing, enjoying the lively atmosphere.

Although the bread rolls in his tummy had already been digested long time ago, he was laughing in his heart; because no matter how slow he walked, Sui Han San You could only follow behind him nicely.

Everybody knew Lu Xiaofeng was more slippery than a fish, he was more sneaky than ghost. If they let down their guard in the slightest, they could forget even seeing his shadow. If he did not stop for dinner, they certainly did not dare to stop for dinner.

However, travelling this dusty road on empty stomach, with only northwest wind for them to drink, definitely would not make them too happy.

In all their lives Sui Han San You had never received this kind of treatment from anybody. Mr. Gu Song finally could not bear anymore. With a wave of his long sleeve he flew like a floating cloud and landed in front of Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng was all smiles. "Why are you stopping me? Am I walking too fast for you?"

With an ashen face Mr. Gu Song asked, "I only want to ask you a question."

He was not someone who had a good sense of humor, much less right now that what was left in his stomach was anger. "I am asking you, do you know what time is it now?"

Lu Xiaofeng blinked his eyes several times. "Looks like now is dinner time."

Mr. Gu Song: "Since you know it, why don't you hurry up and find a place to eat?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because I am not happy."

Mr. Gu Song: "Happy or not, you must eat."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed: "Being forced to have sex and being forced to gamble I have heard, but I have never heard anybody being forced to eat."

Mr. Gu Song: "Now you have."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Whether I eat or not, why do you care?"

Mr. Gu Song: "Everybody has to eat. Don't tell me you are not human?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "That's right, everybody has to eat. But there are kind of people who cannot eat."

Mr. Gu Song: "What kind of people?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "People who are too broke to eat."

Finally Mr. Gu Song understood. With a gleam in his eyes he said, "And if someone is inviting you to eat?"

Lu Xiaofeng said lightly, "It depends."

Mr. Gu Song: "Depends on what?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "It depends on whether he invites me wholeheartedly."

Mr. Gu Song: "If I wholeheartedly want to invite you, will you go?"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled, "If you really want to invite me, certainly it is improper for me to reject."

Mr. Gu Song stared at him. "You don't have money to eat and want to be invited, yet you don't want to open your mouth and ask, but waiting for me to open my mouth and ask you first."

Lu Xiaofeng said indifferently, "Because I know you will definitely come to ask. And since you have come, not only you must take care of my meals, you have to take care of my lodging as well."

Mr. Gu Song fixed his gaze on him for half a day before he finally heaved a long sigh and said, "The rumor floating around the Jianghu is truly not wrong. Dealing with Lu Xiaofeng is really not easy."

Good dish, good wine, good tea.

Mr. Gu Song: "Drink!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I don't drink a little."

Mr. Gu Song: "If you want to drink then you must drink until you are satisfied, right?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Not only you need to be satisfied, you must drink it fast, too."

He really filled his cup full of wine, then raising his head, he poured the wine into his mouth and swallowed.

The way he drank his wine was not really 'drink', but actually 'pour'. Although there are many people in the world who can 'drink' wine, not too many can actually 'pour' wine into their mouths.

Mr. Gu Song looked at him. For the second time there was a gleam in his eyes. He also filled his cup full, and downed it.

Unexpectedly, his drinking method was also 'pour'.

Lu Xiaofeng cheered in his heart: "This old fellow's pouring skill is really not bad."

Mr. Gu Song drew a smug look on his face. "Drinking wine not only must be fast, it has to be painful too."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Painful?"

Mr. Gu Song: "Painful to drink. Three cups or five cups, even if you can drink faster, it's nothing."

Lu Xiaofeng: "How many can you drink?"

Mr. Gu Song: "Drinking much is also considered nothing. Drinking much without getting drunk, now that can be considered a real skill."

This cold and arrogant old loner, when he chatted about wine, it looked like he had changed into a different man.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled. "How much can you drink without getting drunk?"

Mr. Gu Song: "I don't know."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Are you saying that you have never been drunk?"

Mr. Gu Song did not deny at all, he asked back, "How much can you drink without getting drunk?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I only drink one cup and I felt a bit tipsy already. I drink more cups and I still feel the same."

For the third time a gleam appeared on Mr. Gu Song's eyes. "So you have never really been drunk?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not deny; he simply raised his head and poured another cup of wine down his throat.

For a chess player, meeting a worthy match is a very interesting matter; for a drinker, meeting a worthy match is equally satisfying.

For people who don't drink wine, seeing this drinking match was a very senseless matter.

Qing Zhu [lit. green bamboo] and Han Mei [cold plum] were not interested in watching them, their expressions showed nothing. They stood slowly and walked out the door.

The autumn night was as cold as the water.

Two men, with their hands behind their backs, looked up to the sky for a

long time before Qing Zhu slowly asked, "How long has it been since Lao Da [lit. old big or old first, eldest child in a family or the leader of a group] got drunk the last time?"

Han Mei: "Fifty-three days."

Qing Zhu sighed: "I've known it all along that he will be very drunk one time today."

After a long time Han Mei also sighed and said, "Since for how long have you not been drunk?"

Qing Zhu: "Twenty-three years."

Han Mei: "After the three of us got really drunk that day, you have never touched a single drop of wine?"

Qing Zhu: "Among the three of us, as long as there is one who's always sober, we can live a bit longer."

Han Mei: "Two people sober even better."

Qing Zhu: "Therefore, you also have never touched a drop in more than twenty years."

Han Mei: "Twenty one years and seventeen days."

Qing Zhu smiled, "While in fact your alcohol capacity is greater than Lao Da."

Han Mei also smiled, "The one with the greatest alcohol capacity is certainly you."

Qing Zhu: "But I know that in this world there is no one who has never been drunk."

Han Mei nodded. "That's right," he said, "If you drink, you will get drunk."

If you drink, you will get drunk. This saying has never changed from time immemorial. Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng was drunk.

The room was very spacious, with a very big fire in the fireplace. Lu Xiaofeng was lying down, stark naked on a very big bed.

He always thought that sleeping with your clothes on was just like farting with your pants down. Not only it was troublesome, it was also totally superfluous.

It doesn't matter who you are, when you drunk, you would get a very deep sleep. Lu Xiaofeng was not an exception. It's just that he always woke up earlier than most people.

Right now outside the window was still a layer of darkness, the room was also dark, but he was already wide awake. In the face of this cavernous emptiness, the boundless darkness surrounding him, he was

only staring blankly as if his soul had left him.

He remembered a lot of matters; many of those matters he could not tell others, not only that, he did not even want to remember those matters. Perhaps because he wanted to forget these matters that he intentionally challenged Gu Song to a drinking contest; he deliberately wanted to be drunk.

But as soon as he opened his eyes, he would remember these matters.

Why is it that things that should be forgotten always come back to haunt you? Why is it that things that should be remembered always slip out of your mind?

Lu Xiaofeng sighed quietly. He got up without making a noise, as if he was afraid he might wake up the person sleeping right next to him.

Was there anybody sleeping right next to him?

Wasn't he afraid of waking himself up?

Right this moment he suddenly heard a soft sigh. Although there was not anybody sleeping by his side, there was somebody in the room.

In the darkness he seemed to see a vague outline of a shadow, sitting motionlessly on a chair opposite his bed. He did not know when the person came; he also did not know how long the person had been sitting there.

"Being drunk along the country road, he cannot bear to continue his journey," that person sighed, and then continued, "But if this road is travelled too much, it's like all the interest for it is gone." [Translator's note: this must be a quote from some famous verse, but I do not have the ability to provide you with the exact reference. Plus, I am never good at translating poems or quotations, so the above translation might be off. For these, please accept my apology.]

Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

In circumstances where everyone else was not able to laugh, he would always be able to laugh.

With a smile he said, "I am surprised Sire is a very educated man."

The man: "I do not dare. It's just that sometimes my heart is moved and I could not help but blurt it out."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Sire came in the middle of the night, I am sure not to say these words for me to listen?"

The man: "I do have something else to say."

Lu Xiaofeng: "And you insist that I listen?"

The man: "Seems like that. Yes."

Although he was speaking softly in an even tempo, his voice was actually piercing with sharpness that was sharper than the tip of the needle.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and simply lay back down on the bed. "The matter that I have to hear, most probably is not something too pleasant. If I can listen lying down, why would I have to sit?"

The man: "Listening while lying down, aren't you showing too much disrespect toward your guest?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I believe Sire is not my guest. I have never even seen Sire's appearance."

The man: "If you want to see me, it's very easy."

He coughed lightly once, and the door behind him immediately opened. A flicker of flame appeared as a lantern was lit. Someone dressed in black, even wore black cloth mask, with a stature as slender as a bald eagle, standing straight like a javelin, suddenly appeared from the darkness.

His hands were holding a bronze lantern. There was a sword scabbard hanging on his back. The lantern looked exquisite, antique and elegant; the sword also looked exquisite, antique and elegant, making him to look like someone who had been banished in hell for many years and then suddenly received the devil's spell to hasten back to bring disaster to the world of the living as an evil apparition; so much so that the lantern seemed to emit an eerie bluish green light, bringing an unspeakable gloomy feeling into the room.

The man sitting on the chair also appeared suddenly under the light.

The fire in the fireplace was already out.

Dark and gloomy light, dark and gloomy room, dark and gloomy man.

His attire was very elegant, stunningly beautiful; his expression looked noble and graceful. His eyes fiery, with the dignity of one who used to give orders. But all in all, he still looked dark and gloomy, so much so that he looked more frightening than the man in black standing behind him.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Not bad, not bad indeed."

The man: "Not bad? I do not look bad?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed: "Sire's appearance surely does not differ too much to the one I've always imagined."

The man: "Do you know who I am?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Jia Leshan?"

The man let out a breath softly. "You have seen me?"

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head.

The man: "But you actually recognize me."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled. "Other than Jia Leshan, who in their right mind would brave the cold to look for me in this desolate place? Other than Jia Leshan, who would have an ancient-sword-wielding, internal-energy-expert Wulin master like this as an escort?"

Jia Leshan laughed out loud.

His laughter was similar to his personality, carrying that kind of sharp, oppressive and mocking sentiment. "Good, Lu Xiaofeng is not ashamed of being Lu Xiaofeng, you indeed have keen eyes."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I do not dare. It's just that sometimes I see something and I could not help but blurt it out."

Jia Leshan's laughter stopped. He stared at him for a very long time before finally he slowly said, "Do you also know why I came?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I would rather hear it directly from you."

Jia Leshan: "I want you to come back."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Come back? Where should I come back?"

Jia Leshan: "Come back to the soft and red wide-world of luxury, come back to those bright and glamorous restaurants and casinos, to the perfume and cosmetic-filled red light district. Those are places Lu

Xiaofeng should go.”

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, “That’s true, I also want to come back very much, it’s just that ...”

Jie Leshan cut him off, “I also know that recently you have been strapped and short of cash; therefore, I have already prepared something to tide you over.”

He coughed again, and an old servant with long white hair, followed by two big men carrying a huge chest, walked into the room.

The chest was brimming with ingots of dazzling yellow gold and white silver.

Lu Xiaofeng frowned. “Where did this much money come from? Isn’t it troublesome?”

Jia Leshan: “I understand that banknotes are more convenient, but they are not as real as gold and silver in the eyes of the beholder. If you want to move others’ heart, you must use quite the real thing.”

Lu Xiaofeng: “Make sense.”

Jia Leshan: “You are willing to accept?”

Lu Xiaofeng: “The money is moving the heart, why am I not willing to accept?”

Jia Leshan: "You are also willing to go back?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I am not."

He smiled, and then continued: "Accepting is one thing, coming back is another. These two things are basically unrelated to one another."

Jia Leshan laughed.

Unexpectedly, he was also the kind of man who could laugh when there was no reason for him to laugh.

"This is the enticement by profit." He smiled again, "For a man like you, I also know that this kind of enticement by profit will not be enough."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What else did you prepare?"

Jia Leshan: "Profit is not enough, naturally there is intimidation."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Very good."

The man in black suddenly said, "Very bad."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Bad?"

Man in black: "Sire's reputation covers the imperial court and the ordinary people, you make friends with everybody everywhere, even the current Emperor is good to you. If I kill a man like you, my trouble will not be a few."

Lu Xiaofeng: "And thus you don't want to kill me?"

Man in black: "I don't."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I happen to be not willing to die either."

Man in black: "It's a pity that once my sword leaves its sheath, it must find blood."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed again. "Is this intimidation?"

Man in black: "This is not only a warning."

Lu Xiaofeng: "And after a warning?"

The man in black slowly lay down the bronze lantern, and slowly raised his hand. With a sudden ringing noise, the sword had left its scabbard.

A pale sword, as if it longed to drink the enemy's blood to its heart's content.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed: "A truly rare hundreds-of-years-old weapon."

Man in black: "Are you sighing for yourself?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "No."

Man in black: "No?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I am sighing for you. I am happy for you. When I am happy for others, I will also sigh."

Man in black: "Oh?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You are wielding such a divinely sharp weapon, yet are willing to be a lackey for people like Jia Lezhan. You came all the way from Jiangnan, yet you did not meet that friend of mine at all. Your luck is really not bad."

Man in black: "And if I met that friend of yours, then what?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "If you did, then at this moment this sword was already his, and you had entered the yellow dust."

Man in black laughed coldly. "The tone of your voice is certainly not small."

Lu Xiaofeng: "It is not my tone, it is his."

Man in black: "Who is he?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Ximen Chuixue."

Ximen Chuixue!

Long white robe floating like the cloud, a drop of blood slowly dripping from the tip of his sword ...

Sword's ray like the lightning, eyes as cold as the stars.

The blood dripped down, splashing ...

The veins appeared on the hand-holding sword of the man in black. The pupils of his eyes suddenly narrowed. "Too bad you are not Ximen Chuixue!"

In this split second, his sword thrust forward, the sword's ray was like a rainbow, the sword's aura was bone-chilling!

Astonishing power, from an astonishing position, with an astonishing speed!

Such a sharp sword, thrust with such speed, its power was not inferior to a lightning bolt or thunder.

Who in the world is able to resist a lightning bolt or a thunder?

Lu Xiaofeng!

He was still calmly lying down on the bed, only his hand was stretched out from inside the cotton quilt, using two fingers he clamped down on the blade of the sword.

The most amazing in the world, peerless, unparalleled!

Incomparable and unfathomable skill!

As soon as the two fingers clamped down, the sword's ray disappeared, the sword's aura vanished.

Also in this split second, one of the roof-tiles was suddenly lifted up, someone hang upside-down like a monkey. His hand waved, thirty seven cold stars shot down like rain toward Lu Xiaofeng.

It was beyond his anticipation, a murderous act you cannot guard against!

But a series of 'puff, puff, puff!' was heard as all the thirty seven secret projectiles hit the cotton quilt shielding Lu Xiaofeng.

They only hit the cotton quilt.

Such a close distance; the secret projectiles ricocheted and scattered all over the room.

The man in black looked at his clamped sword, the man hanging upside-down from the beam sighed in admiration: "I have long heard about Lu Xiaofeng's most amazing finger skill in the world, who would have thought that he still have such an astonishing internal energy."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "Actually, I am also surprised. When one is faced with a life and death situation, one's strength can grow unusually big."

The man in black suddenly said, "This is not mere strength, this is real qi [chi] and real power."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Real qi [chi] and real power is also strength. If you have no strength, how can you have real qi [chi] and real power?" He stretched out another finger and lightly traced the blade of the sword. He sighed and said, "Good sword!"

Man in black: "You ..."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed again. "I am not Ximen Chuixue; therefore, your sword is still yours, and your life is also still yours."

Jia Leshan also laughed.

"That was intimidation." He was still smiling, "Profit did not work, intimidation also failed. What do you say I should do?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why don't you go back?"

Jia Leshan did not seem to hear him, he continued, "As the saying goes, 'It is difficult for a hero to pass a beautiful woman barrier', Sire is without a doubt a hero; where is the beautiful woman?"

The beautiful woman was outside. With the blowing wind, there was a faint trace of delicate fragrance.

The old servant, who kept his fingernails very long, used a silver ear-spoon to pick the wick of the bronze lantern so that the light was brighter. From outside the door walked a middle-aged woman wearing a pale-colored plain robe, holding the hand of a young maiden wearing a purple gown.

The middle-aged woman was slender with white skin, her figure was graceful, with jet-black hair neatly combed. Under the lantern light, her complexion looked as delicate and tender as that of a young woman. All who had seen her agreed that she was definitely a beautiful woman in her youth. Although she was now middle-aged, she still possessed the charm to make men's hearts beat faster.

Sometimes, this kind of mature and experienced woman was more alluring to a man than a young girl.

But, standing next to the young maiden dressed in purple, all her charms and brilliance completely failed to attract other people's attention.

No one could describe this young maiden's beauty; just like no one could describe why the hearts of men would tremble like the first breeze of spring wind blowing across the lake and rippling the water.

She lowered her head, standing silently over yonder, quietly casting a glance toward Lu Xiaofeng.

She did not even move her fingertips; using only her eyes she calmly gazed at Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng already felt a wave of bizarre change in his heart, so much so that his body was also giving a strange reaction to this bizarre change.

There seemed to be an invisible flame in her eyes, a flame that burned a man's desire.

Only after looking at this young maiden did Lu Xiaofeng finally understand which kind of woman can be considered a natural extraordinarily beautiful woman.

Jia Leshan was sitting comfortably on a chair, enjoying looking at Lu Xiaofeng's facial expression. "She is called Chuchu [lit. lovely/cute]," he said slowly, "Don't you think she is really cute and moving?"

What else could Lu Xiaofeng do but to agree?

Jia Leshan exhaled softly. "Very well," he said, "Anytime you are willing

to go back, she will go with you, along with this chest."

Lu Xiaofeng also exhaled softly. "In that case, you'd better tell her to wait for me here."

Jia Leshan: "When are you going back?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "As soon as I find the Luocha Tablet, I will go back immediately."

Jie Leshan's countenance changed. "What does it take to make you agree? What is it that you actually want?"

Lu Xiaofeng rolled his eyes. "Originally, I want nothing. But now I remember that I do want something."

Jia Leshan: "What is it that you want?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I want Sikong Zhaixing's nose."

Jia Leshan was startled. "Gold and beauty you don't want, why do you want his nose?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because I want to see, after his nose is gone, will he be able to masquerade as a deity or dress up as a ghost and fooling people everywhere."

Jia Leshan stared at him. Suddenly he burst into laughter.

His laughter had changed; now it was bold, clear and bright. Laughing with his face up he said, "Good, good kid, I am surprised this time I still didn't fool you. How did you find out?"

By saying those words, he obviously acknowledged that he was indeed Sikong Zhaixing.

Lu Xiaofeng nonchalantly said, "I can smell your thief smell."

Sikong Zhaixing: "I have a thief smell?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "It doesn't matter whether it is a big thief or a little thief, all thieves have thief smell on them. You are the king of thieves, naturally your smell is heavier. Besides ..."

Sikong Zhaixing could not bear not to ask: "Besides what?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Although I was drunk and lost my consciousness, other than people who used to commit petty burglary like you, everybody else should give up the idea of slipping into my room and stealing my clothes."

His clothes were originally hanging on the head of the bed, but now they were gone.

Sikong Zhaixing laughed: "I was only trying to help you find a reason to

hide underneath the blanket; who wants your clothes?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "So you really don't want my head?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "Your head is too big; it is too heavy to carry, and takes too much space to be kept at home."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What do you want, then?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "Someone wants to look at you."

Lu Xiaofeng: "You haven't seen me enough already?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "If you think it was me who want to look at you, you are wrong. I only need to look at you one time, and I am already full in the stomach."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Who wants to look at me?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "Jia Leshan."

Lu Xiaofeng: "The real Jia Leshan?"

Sikong Zhaixing nodded. "He wants to know you, what kind of man actually is this four-eyebrowed freak? How good you really are?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why didn't he personally come?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "He is already here."

Lu Xiaofeng: "In this room?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "In this room. Let's see if you can spot him."

Altogether, there were nine people in the room.

Other than Sikong Zhaixing and Lu Xiaofeng, there was the man in black who wielded the ancient sword, and then there were the secret projectile expert who was still hanging upside-down from the beam, the old servant whose fingernails were very long, the young maiden, the middle-aged pretty woman, and the two big men who brought the chest in.

Among these seven people, which one was the real Jia Leshan?

Lu Xiaofeng looked up and down at the man in black, sizing him up. "You wield an ancient sword, your martial art skill is not weak, you do not dare to let your true identity known, could you be the real Jia Leshan?"

The man in black did not open his mouth.

But Lu Xiaofeng suddenly shook his head. "No, can't be."

The man in black could not bear not to ask, "Why?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because although your swordsmanship is acute, swift and fierce, you lack certain aggressiveness."

Man in black: "How do you know the real Jia Leshan would have certain aggressiveness?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "If he didn't have certain aggressiveness, how could he dominate the four seas in the past, to be in command of a group of warriors?"

The man in black could not say another word.

The second one Lu Xiaofeng sized up was the secret projectile expert who was hanging upside-down on the roof like a monkey. But he only looked at him once and immediately shook his head. "No, you can't be him."

"Why?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because a man like Jia Leshan will not possibly hang upside-down on the roof like a monkey."

The man also could not say another word.

Next, it was the old servant with very long fingernails' turn.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Based on your position, you should not have kept your

fingernails that long. You raised the wick of the lantern with a silver ear-spoon, which, not only it was exquisitely made, it is also used by veteran Jianghu people to test for poison. Your expression is adequate, your footsteps steady, your internal energy must be not weak."

The old servant's expression did not change. "Could it be that you think Lao Xiu [lit. old rotten - a modest way to refer to one's self] is Jia Leshan?"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled. "You can't be."

The old servant: "Why?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because you are not fit."

The old servant's countenance changed: "I am not fit?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "In the past Jia Leshan dominated the sea, nowadays he is also a prominent figure in his area. Whether there is poison in his food or drink, naturally it will be tested by his numerous attendants; why would he personally carry this kind of knick-knack?"

The old servant also could not say another word.

The two big men carrying the chest were even more impossible; their rough hands and feet, their uncouth appearance lacked of grandeur, anybody would be able to see it instantly.

Now Lu Xiaofeng was staring at the young maiden in purple.

Sikong Zhaixing: "Do you think she could be Jia Leshan?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "It's possible."

Sikong Zhaixing almost screamed: "It is possible?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Based on her beauty and charm [Translator's note: in Chinese, the actual characters used were 'mei li' and 'mei li'. The first 'mei li' (美麗) means beauty, the second 'mei li' (麗力) means 'demon/elf power'.], indeed she can make men to grovel under her skirt, willingly do whatever she bids them to do. During the last several hundred years, among the pirates dominating the oceans, there was one 'overturning-the-state, causing-the-downfall-of-anation' kind of outstandingly beautiful woman; it's just too bad that ..."

Sikong Zhaixing: "Too bad what?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Too bad that her age is too young. At most she could only be Jia Leshan's daughter."

Sikong Zhaixing looked at him. Unexpectedly, he could not hide the feeling of admiration and respect in his eyes. "In that case, only one person left."

The only one left was that middle-aged beautiful woman.

"Could she be Jia Leshan?"

"Of course not."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Jia Leshan dominated the oceans thirty years ago, now he is at least fifty, sixty years old."

The middle-aged woman looked no more than forty years old.

Lu Xiaofeng: "It was said that not only Jia Leshan possessed an inborn supernatural power, his bravery also exceeded that of ten thousand men. During the struggle over the domination of the oceans in the past, he would always be the first to charge the enemy, his bravery was uncontested."

While the middle-aged woman looked extremely gentle, extremely weak.

Sikong Zhaixing smiled: "Although your explanation made a lot of sense, you have actually forgotten the most important point."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "You have forgotten that Jia Leshan is a great man, while this madam is a woman."

Lu Xiaofeng: "That is an inconsequential point."

Sikong Zhaixing: "Oh?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Nowadays, the number of Jianghu people who are adept in the art of disguise is increasing daily. Men masquerade as women, women dress-up as men; it doesn't mean anything."

Sikong Zhaixing: "No matter what, you definitely believe she can't be the Jia Leshan."

Lu Xiaofeng: "It is impossible."

Sikong Zhaixing: "But I know for sure that Jia Leshan is in this room. If the seven of them are not Jia Leshan, then where is Jia Leshan?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "You should not have asked that question."

Sikong Zhaixing: "Why shouldn't I?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because you also know that the things of the world are just like a game of chess, the changes are extremely numerous. Many things that should not happen have actually happened, many things that are impossible to do have been done. Even the vast ocean can be turned into a mulberry orchard; much less other matters?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "Therefore ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Therefore, although this madam can't be Jia Leshan, she actually is."

Sikong Zhaixing: "Are you saying that she is a man dressed-up as a woman?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Hmm."

Sikong Zhaixing laughed. "Jia Leshan dominated the seven seas, and was feared by pirates everywhere. Obviously his appearance was that of a beastly real man. If he looked this delicate, how could the seafaring warriors submit to him?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Perhaps you have forgotten his nickname in the years gone by. I have not."

Sikong Zhaixing: "Why don't you tell me?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "In the years gone by, he was known as Iron-faced Dragon King, because just like the famous general of the former dynasty, Di Qing, whenever he charged and broke through the enemy line, he would always wear a ferocious looking bronze mask on his face."

Unexpectedly, Sikong Zhaixing also could not say another word.

The middle-aged woman sighed and said, "Good, good eyesight."

Lu Xiaofeng: "It's not too bad, I think I can pass a casual inspection."

The middle-aged woman: "That's right, I am Jia Leshan, the Iron-faced Dragon King of the years gone by, and the Jiangnan's benevolent warrior

of today."

When he said the word 'Jia Leshan', the graceful-attitude of his face turned as cold as the autumn frost; when he said the word 'Iron-faced Dragon King', his eyes were as sharp as the blade of a saber. When he finished speaking, he had completely turned into a different individual.

Although his clothing and facial appearance did not change at all, his expression and aura had completely changed. He was like a sharp weapon drawn out of its scabbard; even Lu Xiaofeng was able to feel the murderous aura surrounding him!

The Wulin warriors who killed people as if they are cutting grass are just like sharp swords; they have this murderous aura around their persons.

He started at Lu Xiaofeng, and then continued, "But I still don't understand, how did you see through me?"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled: "Because of her."

He was looking at Chuchu, the heart-moving Chuchu. Each time he looked at her, his eyes were full of admiration and passion.

But Jia Leshan's eyes were full of suspicious and anger. "Because of her? Did she give you a hint?"

Looking at Jia Leshan's expression, Lu Xiaofeng laughed even happier. He lightly said, "I don't care what you think. If she wasn't here, I would

never guess you are Jia Leshan."

Jia Leshan's hand, which was holding Chuchu, suddenly tightened. Immediately Chuchu's beautiful face showed some pain.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed inwardly. He had just realized the relationship between those two people. Ferocious and cunning old fox, gentle and beautiful little white rabbit. Greedy hawk, little canary which lost its freedom ...

He could not bear to see her suffer much longer; thereupon he explained: "Such a beautiful girl like her, wherever she goes, men would not bear not to give her a glance or two."

Jia Leshan: "Humph!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "But the men here actually did not look at her, so much so that nobody even dares to give her a glance. By nature, women like to be looked at by men. Yet the men here did not dare to look at her, obviously not because they are afraid she might get angry, but because they are afraid of you. Therefore ..."

Jia Leshan: "Therefore what?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Therefore, I asked myself: the men in here are not easily intimidated by others; why do they fear you? Is it possible that you are the Jia Leshan who kills without batting an eye?"

Jia Leshan stared at him. Suddenly he burst into laughter. "Good! Well

said! Good thinking!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You came here not to listen to me, but to see me, you want to know what kind of man I am."

Jia Leshan: "Correct."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Well, you have seen me now."

Jia Leshan: "Correct."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What kind of person am I?"

Jia Leshan: "You are a smart person."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed: "Good! Good thinking!"

Jia Leshan: "You are not only smart, but strong-willed as well. No matter what, it would be very difficult to move you. I think that if you are determined to do a certain thing, you would definitely disregard hundreds of obstacles and make an all-out effort to accomplish it."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Good! Well said!"

Jia Leshan: "You will make a very good friend, but also a very frightening adversary."

His saber-blade-sharp eyes were fixed on Lu Xiaofeng. "It's a pity that you are not my friend, therefore, you must die."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I must die?"

Jia Leshan coldly said, "You must die."

The night was growing deeper, the wind was growing cold.

The man in black was still standing straight up like a javelin over yonder. The white-haired old servant took out a small file from his pocket and leisurely filing his long nails. Nobody knew when he jumped down, but the man hanging on the beam was already standing on the ground without creating any noise.

Jia Leshan: "Indeed you have not misjudged people. These three men are truly not to be trifled with. A moment ago you have tasted a stance of Lao San's [lit. ol' three, the third] killer sword and Lao Er's [lit. ol' two, the second] skill of man tian hua yu [flower rain filling the sky]. If Lao Da [the oldest] also joined in, the situation would be different."

Lu Xiaofeng looked at that white-haired old servant. "You must be the Lao Da."

The white-haired old servant laughed coldly. Bending his fingers, the three-inch long nail on his middle finger coiled in unexpectedly, just like a flexible noodle; as it sprang back out, a 'swish' was heard, as a line of wind flew out of his fingernail and pierced the window paper about seven, eight feet away.

If this nail pierced a human's body, what would the outcome be?

Lu Xiaofeng could not restrain from shouting praises: "Good! Good tan zhi shen tong [divine flicking finger]; really worthy to be called Huashan's special skill."

The old servant coldly said, "Your eyesight is indeed not bad."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "Kongtong's killer sword, Xin Shi Niang School's man tian hua yu, plus Huashan's tan zhi shen tong. Looks like I really cannot escape from death today."

Suddenly Sikong Zhaixing laughed. "Others say your eyesight is not bad, but I should say that your eyesight is not good."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "You only recognize those three's martial art origins, but forgot that there are two even more frightening people."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I have not forgotten."

Sikong Zhaixing: "You do not count me?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I don't."

Sikong Zhaixing: "Why?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because in my eyes, not only you are not frightening, you are actually very loveable."

Sikong Zhaixing laughed.

Lu Xiaofeng: "You didn't think I would say that you are loveable, did you?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "I also did not think that you would consider this Miss Chuchu as frightening."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed: "I can also see that she is loveable."

Isn't it true that loveable people are usually also frightening?

Perhaps you do not understand this, but when you really fall in love with someone, I am sure you will understand my meaning.

Sikong Zhaixing: "There is a saying that I am sure you haven't heard yet."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What saying?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "Cute [orig. 'chuchu'] and moving, snatch one's life pursue one's soul."

Lu Xiaofeng turned his head to look at Chuchu. He shook his head and said, "I don't believe you have the ability to snatch one's life pursue one's soul."

Chuchu smiled sweetly, "Neither do I."

Her smile was like the first bloom of a spring flower, her voice was like a Black-naped Oriole [*Oriolus chinensis*, a songbird] flying out the valley, but her hand was more venomous than a rattlesnake.

She made her move when her smile was the sweetest; a golden light flashed, like a lightning it went straight toward Lu Xiaofeng's throat.

The weapon she used was the hairpin on her hair.

Lu Xiaofeng was ready to clamp it down; his fingers had never failed.

But this time, as he was stretching his hand out, he pulled it back instantly, because on this golden flash, he discovered that there were countless thorns, as fine as cow's hair, on the golden hairpin. If he continued clamping, the golden hairpin would definitely break, but the fine thorns would certainly prick his hand.

The thorns must be poisonous. Chuchu definitely was not the first one among the enemies who had used this kind of tactic to deal with him.

Lu Xiaofeng was able to live well 'till now, it certainly was not entirely

due to his good luck.

His eyes and his reaction were quicker; once his hand was pulled back, his body also slid away. 'Swish, swish!' the hairpin streaked over his neck.

Chuchu flipped her wrist, the hairpin also followed.

The hairpin was short and agile, and hence the changes were certainly very quick. In an instant she had stabbed twenty seven stances, each stance came from a very difficult angle for the opponent to evade; each stab aimed at vital point.

The hairpin in the hand of this cute and moving young woman was indeed far more frightening than the sharp sword in the hand of the man in black.

Only, it was a pity that the opponent she met was Lu Xiaofeng.

Her movements were fast, Lu Xiaofeng dodged even faster. She stabbed twenty seven times, Lu Xiaofeng evaded twenty six times. Suddenly he flipped his hand and grabbed her delicate, beautiful and tender wrist.

The wrist was not broken. Lu Xiaofeng had always been a man who 'pity fragrance and compassionate toward jade', how could he have the heart to act cruelly?

But her heart was cruel enough. With a twist of her waist she suddenly launched a fierce kick toward Lu Xiaofeng's groin.

In all honesty, it was not a move a virtuous young woman should put forth. Nobody would guess that such a gentle loveable girl would put forth such a malicious move.

But obviously Lu Xiaofeng had anticipated this movement, because he gently twisted her wrist and flung her away, so that when her foot had just about to kick, her body had already been thrown away. Struggling hard to turn her body over in the air, she landed on Jia Leshan's bosom.

Jia Leshan knitted his eyebrows: "Are you injured?"

Surprisingly, the tone of his voice was very gentle.

Chuchu shook her head, she slowly slid down from Jia Leshan's bosom. Suddenly, with a backhand movement the golden hairpin in her hand went straight into Jia Leshan's chest.

This change was completely beyond Lu Xiaofeng's anticipation; much less for Jia Leshan, even in his wildest dreams he had never thought this could happen.

It was undoubtedly a fatal strike!

But Jia Leshan was worthy to be called a formidable character of the present age. In the face of death his mind stayed clear, he was still able to make his move. Furthermore, once he made his move, he was able to grip Chuchu's throat tightly.

Chuchu was so scared that her face turned scarlet; her throat did not stop making 'ge ge' noises.

Jia Leshan's hands tightened; with a fierce grin he roared, "Lowly woman, I'll take your ..."

He had not finished speaking when with a 'zip' noise a three cun and three fen [1 cun is approximately 1 inch, 1 fen is approximately 33mm or about 1/8 inch] long fingernail had already pierced the 'yu shu' [lit. jade comb] acupoint on the back of his head.

This was also a fatal strike!

Jia Leshan's hands loosened; he roared as he turned around and pounced on that white-haired old servant.

But as he was turning around, a burst of objects splitting the air; thirteen cold stars simultaneously hit him on his back. A pale sword also came in lightning-fast speed, piercing his waist.

As soon as their strike succeeded, four people leaped back instantly, retreated into the four corners of the room.

When the sword was pulled out, blood spurted out. Surprisingly, Jia Leshan had not fallen down. His very good looking face had turned unspeakably and hideously frightening. His pair of charming eyes also bulged out, staring at those four people. "You ... why did you do it?" he said in a raspy voice.

The man in black gripped his sword so tightly that the blue veins on the back of his hand popped out, his knuckles also turned white from excessive force, but his trembling did not stop. The old servant and the man who hang from the beam were also trembling incessantly.

They were so shaken that they could not speak.

The one who could speak was, surprisingly, Chuchu. Biting her lip, she sneered and said, "You should understand why we did this."

Jia Leshan sighed, with his last breath he said, "I don't understand ..."

Those words were spoken with a weakening voice so that by the end, his voice turned into a mere sigh.

He did not understand. Even in his death he did not understand.

The lantern gradually dimmed.

There was not a single noise in the room, as if all breathing and heartbeats had stopped.

Jia Leshan had fallen on his own pool of blood.

He came suddenly, he died abruptly.

Lu Xiaofeng loosened his tight fist; he suddenly realized that his own

palms were drenched in cold sweat.

The first to speak was Chuchu. Was it because by nature women's tongues are more dexterous and flexible than men's?

She turned around to face Lu Xiaofeng: "Surely you didn't think that we might kill him."

Lu Xiaofeng concurred. He thought that in a matter like this, it would be hard for anybody to imagine this might happen.

Chuchu: "Do you know why we wanted to kill him?"

Lu Xiaofeng hesitated – an unmatched marriage relation would always bring about tragedy. It was not that he did not know this fact, but he would rather hear her say it with her own mouth.

Chuchu's face appeared grieved and anger. "He used force to hold me captive, he coerced me to be his play thing. He also blackmailed them and forced them to be his lackeys. We had always wanted to kill him, but it was a pity that so far we could not find the opportunity."

Without a doubt Jia Leshan was an extremely frightening man; if they did not have at least ninety percent confidence of success, they certainly would not dare to act rashly.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Could it be that this time I gave you a good opportunity?"

Chuchu nodded her head. "And that's why not only we are very appreciative, we are also prepared to repay you."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled. When the word 'repay' came from a woman's lips, it usually carried a different meaning.

But Chuchu's expression was very somber as she said, "Our mission is to find the Luocho Tablet, yet we also know that your chance of success is next to nothing, because our current situation is still better than yours."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

Chuchu: "If you wish, we can do everything within our power to help you."

Lu Xiaofeng: "How will you help?"

Chuchu pointed her finger toward the chest brimming with gold and silver on the floor: "A chest like this, we still have twelve more on our carriages. Li Xia does not know Jia Leshan has died, she also has never seen his true identity; therefore ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Therefore, if I masquerade as Jia Leshan and buy Li Xia's Luocho Tablet with this money, we will be successful without too much effort."

Chuchu sighed. "At least Jia Leshan was not mistaken at all, you are definitely a smart man."

Lu Xiaofeng: "But I still don't understand why you want to do it like this?"

Chuchu hesitated a little bit before answering, "Because we are unwilling that others should know that Jia Leshan died under our hands."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Are you afraid his disciples would avenge him?"

Chuchu laughed: "Nobody will avenge him. It's just that ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "It's just that he was a very rich person, he left behind a lot of inheritance. As his murderers, you don't have any chance of ever acquiring his inheritance."

Chuchu sighed again: "You are indeed very smart, so smart that it is scary."

Lu Xiaofeng: "You do not have any confidence to kill me to shut my mouth, yet you are afraid this secret will leak, you are concocting this idea of buying me."

Chuchu winked. "Are you still not satisfied?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "Too bad that I am not the only one with eyes in this room, I am also not the only one with a mouth."

Chuchu: "Everybody in this room is on our side, except Sikong Daxia

[great hero] ..."

Sikong Zhaixing: "I am not a Daxia, but a Dazei [great thief]."

Chuchu: "Right. Since our Sikong Dazei is a good friend of Lu Xiaofeng, if Lu Xiaofeng is willing to comply, Sikong Dazei will certainly not sell him off."

Sikong Zhaixing stared at her. "I said I am a Dazei, and you also say that I am a Dazei?"

Chuchu sweetly said, "This is called, 'to follow one's precepts is the sincerest form of respect'."

Sikong Zhaixing also laughed.

After all, he was a man. A beautiful woman in front of a man, whatever she says, usually the man would find it very fascinating.

Chuchu definitely had a very high confidence on her own beauty. She cast him a glance with the corner of her eye, "What do you say?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "Sikong Dazei is not Lu Xiaofeng's friend; therefore, he can sell Lu Xiaofeng off anytime. But Sikong Dazei has never wished to invite any trouble, especially to attract this kind of trouble, therefore ..."

Chuchu: "Therefore, Sikong Dazei also agrees."

Sikong Zhaixing: "But Sikong Dazei has one condition."

Chuchu rolled her eyes. "What condition? Don't tell me Sikong Dazei wants me to accompany him sleeping."

These words were more shocking than her kick to Lu Xiaofeng's groin just a moment ago.

Sikong Zhaixing laughed aloud. "A girl like you, if you sleep by my side, I would wake up with a start even if I am sound asleep."

Chuchu: "What do you want, then?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "If you are successful in obtaining the Luocha Tablet, let those four women go."

Chuchu: "You mean Li Xia and the others?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "Uh huh."

Chuchu winked at him. "Why do you care about them this much? Have they accompanied you sleeping?"

Sikong Zhaixing stared at her. With a rueful smile he shook his head: "You look like a nice girl, but why is it that you always talk about those things?"

Chuchu sweetly said, "Because whenever I talk about those things, I always feel aroused, I feel very excited."

Sikong Zhaixing sighed. "I only want to ask you: do you agree to my condition?"

Chuchu: "Of course I agree."

Sikong Zhaixing immediately stood up. He waved his hand to Lu Xiaofeng and said, "Goodbye!"

Lu Xiaofeng called out, "What about my clothes?"

Sikong Zhaixing: "There is this kind of woman in the room, what do you need clothes for? Since when did you become this stupid?" He laughed and jumped out; he was already outside the window before the last few words were even finished. In an instant his laughter was already thirty zhang [1 zhang is approximately 10 feet or 3 meters] away.

Nobody knew since when there were only two people left in the room. Lu Xiaofeng was lying on the bed, Chuchu was standing by the bed.

She still looked very docile; docile and tender, yet again she asked a shocking question: "Do you want me to sleep with you?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I do."

This time he was not the least bit shocked; he did not even blink.

Chuchu laughed. With a tender voice she said, "In that case, why don't you lie down here alone and slowly think about what you want."

Suddenly she turned around and left, without even looked back. It was not before she reached the door did she turned around and waved. "We'll see you tomorrow."

'Bang!' she slammed the door shut.

With eyes open wide Lu Xiaofeng stared at the ceiling, while asking himself, "Why do I always meet these strange people? These strange matters ...?"

Actually, he did not know that an even stranger matter was waiting for him.

Chapter 6 – Ice Country, Strange Talk

The place they were heading was not on the horizon at all, it was on the Songhua River. And Songhua River was not on the horizon. It was in between Baishan [lit. white mountain, a prefecture level city in Jilin province] and Heishui [lit. black water, a county on northwest Sichuan].

Rahasu was south of Songhua River. This word means ‘the Old House’ [orig. Lau Wu]. Although the name itself carried the connotation of a happy and cozy place, it was actually a desolate and cold place. When the Chongyang Festival [ninth day of the ninth month] comes around, the river freezes, and it would not thaw until the Qingming [early April, the tomb-sweeping day] of the next year. So the river was frozen more or less seven months out of a year.

But these seven months were not distressing at all.

As a matter of fact, Lau Wu’s residents were looking forward to these seven months of frozen river, because it was a period when their days would have more variations, would be richer with interesting activities.

“Where is exactly Rahasu?”

“On the Songhua River.”

“How can there be a small town on the river?”

“Strictly speaking, the town is not on the river at all, but on the ice.”

“On the ice?” Lu Xiaofeng laughed. Although he had seen many strange occurrences, he had never seen a small town on the ice.

People who had never been to Rahasu would indeed have a very difficult time believing this, but Rahasu was indeed on the ice.

That section of the river’s surface was not very wide, only about twenty, thirty zhang. But the ice was more than ten chi deep [1 chi is approximately 1 foot or 1/3 of a meter].

Long time residents of Lao Wu always had some kind of extraordinary premonition on when the river was going to freeze. Perhaps they could smell it from the wind, or hear the news from the breeze, or see it from the wave that the river was about to freeze.

Therefore, a few days before the river was about to freeze, they tossed the pre-assembled wooden frame into the river and tied it firmly with the rope to the bank of the river, much like the migrating people of the ancient times staking out their territory on the wilderness.

Once the river froze, this section of the river surface turned into a long and wide crystal main street, dazzling to the eyes.

By this time, the wooden frame on the surface of the river had been frozen like they were rooted inside the ice. By adding beams and rafters, laying out bricks and tiles, with sandy soil mixed with water as the bonding agent, in just one night the walls would be frozen solid as rocks.

Thereupon one by one, all kinds and sizes of houses and buildings appeared on the river, built on ice, so that in just three to five days this place had turned into a bustling little town, so much so that even a large carriage pulled by eight horses would be able to travel on the crystal main street.

All kinds of stores of various trades were also open for business. Although outside a drop of water would freeze into ice, inside the buildings the air was as warm as the springtime.

Listening to all this, Lu Xiaofeng felt like he was listening to a fairy tale.

"In a place where water turns into ice, where even your nose can freeze and fall off, how can the air be as warm as the springtime inside the buildings?"

"Because we can build fire inside the house, we can even build fire underneath the kang [a heatable brick bed]."

"Build fire on the ice?"

"That's right."

"What about the ice?"

"The ice stays as ice, it won't change the least bit."

The ice stayed right up to the Qingming season of the next year before

it started to melt. By that time, the people had already moved their 'homes' ashore, leaving empty wooden skeleton and waste, which would be washed out, along with the ice chunks, by the surging river.

Therefore, this bustling small town on the ice would vanish into the thin air, probably like a dream in the spring time.

Right now, it was the time when the river freezes, as a matter of fact, it was the coldest time of the year.

And this was the time Lu Xiaofeng arrived at Rahasu.

Naturally he did not arrive alone, because his status was different now, even his appearance was not the same. Other than the original moustache, which looked exactly like his eyebrows, he now grew a clump of beard on his chin. It would not be such a big deal if this change happened to other people; but to him, it was a big difference because originally he was known as the four-eyebrowed man, and now this special characteristic was lost with the addition of a beard.

This change had made him look like a different person, perhaps he would look like the number one millionaire of Jiangnan, the Jia Leshan.

His style was not small, to begin with; now that he was leading a large entourage, wearing thousands of taels worth sable-fur coat, riding on a large carriage heated by a stove, he did indeed look like an insufferably arrogant multi-millionaire.

Chuchu, wearing silver-fox fur-coat, nestled by his side like a little

pigeon.

This girl was wild and unpredictable; sometimes she was weird to the point of very annoying, some other times she seemed to be ready to go to bed with you any time. But as soon as you actually made your move, you would not be able to even touch her.

Lu Xiaofeng was no exception; therefore, in the past several days his mood was no good at all.

He was a normal and healthy man; would you say his mood was supposed to be good if he was entangled with such a girl all day long, yet when the night came he was left to stare blankly at the ceiling alone?

Sui Han San You were still following him from a distance; they did not interfere with whatever he was doing.

Their only objective was for Lu Xiaofeng to find the Luocha Tablet for them, so for them, it does not matter whether Lu Xiaofeng turned into Jia Leshan or Zhen Leshan [Translator's note: a play of words. 'Jia' sounds like 'fake' (different character), 'Zhen' means 'real']. They did not care, they took a completely 'did not hear, did not ask' policy.

From the window of the carriage looking ahead to the distance, they were able to see the dazzling bright, jade-white crystal main street.

Chuchu sighed softly, "Finally we are through with this stage of the journey."

Lu Xiaofeng also sighed. He knew that all endless arduous journeys would eventually come to an end; however, his heart was still feeling very happy seeing that the destination was in sight.

The spirit of the driver of the carriage also rose, he lashed his whip to make the horses run faster. White mist spurted out from the horses' nostrils, while dense white foam flowed down from the corner of their mouths. Looking into the distance, they now could see the outline of the houses in the little town on the ice.

And then the night came.

In bitter cold, on the extreme north, places like this, night always comes quickly. Clearly it was not even dusk just a moment ago, and now suddenly the night had covered the earth. The brilliance of the crystal main street was also dimmed. One lantern after another was lit, and very soon the small town that had vanished in the dark was suddenly brightened by glorious lantern lights.

The light illuminated the ice, and the ice reflected the light; the town looked like a cluster of crystal palaces, standing on a piece of colored glaze world. Whoever saw this scene for the first time would certainly be dazzled in awe; it was very relaxing.

Lu Xiaofeng was no exception.

Along the way he had suffered countless hardship, so much so that several times he almost lost his puny life.

But in this moment, he suddenly felt everything was worth it. If time could go back to the past and brought him back to the Silver Hook Casino, and let him choose again, he would still agree to come here one more time.

Isn't it true that hardship would make one's life richer, more abundant? To obtain true happiness, won't one have to pay the price of hardship first?

Lu Xiaofeng could not restrain from sighing softly. "Perhaps this place would not look as beautiful as this if it is right across the street from your home and you can visit it anytime."

Chuchu also sighed softly, "You are right."

Night, night market. The little town on the ice, glorious lantern lights. The light from the buildings and the reflection of the light from the ice enhanced each other's beauty. One lantern became two; two lanterns became four, as if the whole universe was full with glittering stars. Even Beijing's most busy street could not compare with this place.

The street was not narrow at all; all kinds of shops lined up on either side of it, the street was busy with carriages, horses and pedestrians, sounds of people talking and laughing were heard from the teahouses and wine shops.

Looking at these people, and then looking at this crystal glass world, Lu Xiaofeng practically could not tell whether this place was earthly or heavenly.

As they entered the street, he knew that the first building he saw was a small wine shop, because there was a sign board which said, 'Tai Bai Yi Feng' [Tai Bai legacy. Tai Bai refers to the 'Great Li Bai', a poet of Tang Dynasty]; under the board stood a woman wearing a leather coat lined with purple satin, looking at him with smiling eyes.

The woman was not too pretty, but her smile was very charming, very warm. When she smiled her round face revealed two deep dimples. Her pair of eyes, which seemed to be always smiling although she was not smiling, was fixed on Lu Xiaofeng's face.

Chuchu snorted a cold laugh from her nose: "She seems to be very interested in you."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I don't even know her."

Chuchu: "Of course you don't know her, but I do."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

Chuchu: "Her surname is Tang, she is called Tang Keqing. Everybody thinks it is so easy to get close to her; looks like you are no exception."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "You seem to know her a lot?"

Chuchu: "Of course."

Lu Xiaofeng: "But she does not seem to know you."

Chuchu winked. "Guess, how do I know her?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I can't guess, and I do not want to guess."

Chuchu: "Jia Leshan always handled matters meticulously. Before he came here, he had already investigated those four women carefully; he even had someone draw pictures of them."

Lu Xiaofeng frowned. "Are you saying that she is one of the four women the Blue Beard sent away?"

Chuchu: "She is precisely the Lao San [lit. 'ol three, the third in rank], that is, the Blue Beard's second mistress."

Lu Xiaofeng could not help from turning around his head to give her another look, only to see another woman.

The woman came out from a drug store, specialized in herbal medicine used specifically for the treatment of external injury, across the street, and entered Tang Keqing's small wine shop. She was draped in black clothing, her stature was thin and small, her face always wore cold and apathetic expression, as if everybody else in the world owed her a couple hundred taels of silver and nobody had paid her back.

No matter how you look at it, you won't say that she was an attractive woman, but she would definitely catch your attention. She was totally of a different type from Tang Keqing, but contrary to expectation, it looked like they were friends; not only just regular friends, but good friends.

Chuchu: "You are very interested in this woman, are you not?"

With a forced laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "Do I know her?"

Chuchu: "I do know her."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Are you saying she is also ..."

Chuchu: "Her surname is Leng, called Hong'er. She was Blue Beard's third mistress."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "Blue Beard is indeed a very strange character. After he got that sweet and cute second mistress, why would he take this cold and unfriendly Lau Si [lit. 'ol four; the fourth in rank]?"

Chuchu said matter-of-factly, "A cold and unfriendly woman also has her good points. If you have a chance, you can try it yourself."

Lu Xiaofeng could not bear not to look back again, only to see two men carrying someone who had broken his leg toward the drugstore's door. "Is Doctor Leng in?" they shouted, "Please come over."

Turned out this Leng Hong'er still had some skill in treating external injury, other than being the boss of this herbal medicine store.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed: "What do you know? She still possesses some skills!"

As soon as he closed his mouth, Lu Xiaofeng realized that in this world, there might be some women who do not eat rice, but woman who do not eat vinegar [meaning, jealous], he had never seen any.

Yet Chuchu only laughed and winked. "Actually, among Blue Beard's four women, the prettiest is the first mistress, Chen Jingjing."

Chen Jingjing?

Lu Xiaofeng had heard this name before.

"... the people of Rahasu are usually narrow-minded, often show hostility towards foreigners and newcomers. Other than two people, it is best if you do not believe whatever anybody else is saying ... One is called Lao Shanyang [lit. old mountain goat]; he was my father's former business partner. The other is Chen Jingjing ..."

Immediately he recalled Ding Xiangyi's warning, but he had never guessed that Chen Jingjing was also one of Blue Beard's women.

Chuchu cast him a sidelong glance with the corner of her eye, she lightly said, "If you want to see her, I might be able to help you find her."

Lu Xiaofeng could not restrain from asking: "Do you know where she is?"

Chuchu: "She is Li Xia's right hand woman, chances are she is at the

casino, helping Li Xia running her business."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Casino? What casino?"

Chuchu: "Silver Hook Casino."

Lu Xiaofeng: "There is a Silver Hook Casino in here?"

Chuchu nodded. "We have an appointment with Li Xia to meet at the Silver Hook Casino."

Lu Xiaofeng did not ask further, because he had already seen a shiny silver hook swaying in the wind.

The door was not wide, the silver hook glittered under the lantern light.

Lu Xiaofeng pushed the door open, he went from the bone-chilling cold of outside to the as-warm-as-spring room. He took off his sable fur coat and casually tossed it to a chair behind the door, and then he took a deep breath.

The air was filled with men's tobacco and alcohol smell, mixed with women's cosmetics and perfumes, plus the smell of fresh wood shavings and paint ...

It was not a suitable air for someone to take a deep breath, but Lu Xiaofeng was very familiar with this kind of smell.

Sikong Zhaixing was right, Lu Xiaofeng belonged to this kind of place.

He loved luxury, he loved excitement, he liked to indulge. It was his weakness, but he had never denied this fact -- Everybody must have some kind of weaknesses, right?

Although the scale of this gambling establishment could not be compared with that of Blue Beard's, the gamblers were also not as orderly, but mahjong, dice, and all kinds of gambling tables were also available in this place.

Lu Xiaofeng did not wait for Chuchu to lead the way; with stuck-out chest and big strides he walked straight in.

He was perfectly aware that everybody's attention was at him; they were looking at his clothes, his style. No matter who, those who looked at him saw a grand guest, a tycoon.

Tycoons' eyes are usually looking up, above everybody's head. Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng also held his head high. But he could still see someone was walking over to him with smile on his face.

He did not pay attention to any particular person, but this man's manner was too strange; his attire was even weirder than even Lu Xiaofeng had seldom seen this kind of eccentric person.

This man was wearing a red satin loose robe, the robe was embroidered with all kinds of flowers; there were yellow flowers, blue flowers, green flowers.

The weirdest of all, he also wore a very, very tall pointed hat; the hat was also embroidered with six large scarlet characters, 'Number One Child Prodigy in the World' [orig. tian xia di yi shen tong' – 6 characters].

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. Of course he recognized this person. This must be Li Xia's precious younger brother, Li Shentong ['shentong' means child prodigy].

Seeing Lu Xiaofeng laughed, Li Shentong also laughed. His laugh was half silly, half stupid, half insane, half wild. He walked with a sway like a woman, cupped his fists to greet Lu Xiaofeng, saying, "How are you?"

Suppressing his laughter, Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Good."

Li Shentong: "Your honorable surname?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Jia."

Li Shentong looked at him from top to bottom, sizing him up. "Jia Xiong [brother Jia] came from different part of the country?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Hmm."

Li Shentong: "I wonder how would Jia Xiong like to gamble? 'Tian Jiu'? 'Chan Shuang'? Dice?" [My apology, I am not familiar with gambling. The original were 天九 and 单双, respectively.]

Although his manner seemed silly and half insane, his speech was surprisingly quite clear and normal.

Lu Xiaofeng had not replied when someone else behind him answered on his behalf, "This Master Jia is not here to gamble, but to see someone."

The voice was gentle, tender and silvery, it was a woman's voice, but it was not Chuchu's voice. The woman's manner was very refined, her look was also very good. Chuchu was standing behind her, busily signaling Lu Xiaofeng with her eyes.

Could this woman be Chen Jingjing?

Lu Xiaofeng face did not show any emotion. "Since you know that I am here to see someone, I am sure you also know who I am looking for."

Chen Jingjing nodded. "Please follow me."

There was a small cottage behind the casino, unexpectedly the decoration was very exquisite, but there was nobody in there. Lu Xiaofeng sat down on a large bamboo chair draped in fox fur. "Where is Li Xia?"

Chen Jingjing: "She is not here."

Lu Xiaofeng's face sank. "I traveled over thousands of li to see her, and she is not here?"

Chen Jingjing laughed. Her laughter was also gentle and soft. With a soft voice she said, "It is exactly because she knew Master Jia is coming that she left."

Lu Xiaofeng angrily said, "What do you mean 'she left'?"

Chen Jingjing: "Because she cannot see Master Jia for the time being."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why?"

Chen Jingjing: "She has left, but she may come back, because she does not wish to offend you, and when she comes back, she will bring the LuoCha Tablet along."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What did she say?"

Chen Jingjing: "She said she would like Master Jia to render the payment to me. After I deliver the money to her, she will come back promptly."

Lu Xiaofeng deliberately slapped the table: "What kind of business practice is this? I haven't seen the goods, yet you want my money first?"

Chen Jingjing was still smiling very tenderly: "She also wants me to pass this message to you: if Master Jia does not agree to this condition, the deal is off."

Lu Xiaofeng sprang up from the chair, but then he slowly sat back

down.

Chen Jingjing smiled: "If you asked me, I think it would be better if Master Jia agree to this condition, because she has hidden the Luochoa Tablet in a very secret location, a very secure place. Other than her, nobody else knows where it is. If she is unwilling to take it out, nobody will be able to find it."

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes glimmered: "She is afraid I was going to force her to hand the Luochoa Tablet over, therefore, she went into hiding as soon as I arrived."

Chen Jingjing did not deny at all.

With a cold laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "She is not afraid I am going to find her?"

Chen Jingjing laughed: "You won't find her. If she doesn't want to be found, nobody can find her."

Although she was laughing tenderly, her eyes showed her determination; apparently she was also a strong-willed woman, and had a complete confidence that nobody could find Li Xia's hiding place.

Lu Xiaofeng stared at her. He said coldly, "Even if I can't find her, I will have a way to make you to take me there."

Chen Jingjing smiled while shaking her head. "Of course I know that the way Master Jia handles matters must be extraordinary; it's a pity that I do

not know where the Luocho Tablet is being hidden, I also do not know where Li Dajie [eldest sister Li] has gone. Otherwise, why would she leave me here?"

Her manner was very calm, her voice was also completely under control; anybody would know that she was telling the truth.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "If that's the case, if I want the Luocho Tablet, I won't have any other choice but to agree to her condition, will I?"

Chen Jingjing also sighed. "That Li Dajie of ours is indeed a very astute and cautious woman; we are also ..."

She did not continue. There was no need for her to continue. Just from her sigh anybody could tell that they had suffered more than just a few hardships from Li Xia.

Lu Xiaofeng muttered, "What if after I pay her she is still unwilling to give me the goods?"

Chen Jingjing: "I also do not have any way of guaranteeing you over that matter; therefore, there is no harm in Master Jia giving it further consideration. We have already prepared a place for Master Jia to rest."

Lu Xiaofeng stood up suddenly. With a cold voice he said, "No need. I will find one myself."

Chen Jingjing: "Master Jia has just arrived here, you do not have any acquaintance yet; how would you find a place?"

In big strides Lu Xiaofeng walked out; with head held high he said, "I don't have any acquaintances, but I have money."

Naturally Chuchu always stayed by his side. As soon as they left the Silver Hook Casino, Chuchu laughed and clapped her hands. "Good! Very good!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "What do you mean 'very good'?"

Chuchu: "Your acting was very good. You truly acted like a millionaire who is covered in money from head to toe."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled ruefully, "Actually I know that Jia leshan's conduct was extremely shady, he would never act like a newly rich person. I just could not think of acting any other way."

Chuchu laughed. "But your act was very convincing. If I did not know Jia leshan, I would have been fooled myself."

Lu Xiaofeng: "But apparently Chen Jingjing was not a simple woman at all, Li Xia must be even more astute and fierce. I don't know if I will be able to fool her."

Chuchu: "Actually, it doesn't matter if you can fool her or not. She only recognizes the money and not the person anyway."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, but did not say anything. He was thinking in his

heart that now he had seen Chen Jingjing. Under the circumstances, he definitely could not reveal his true identity; introducing himself as Ding Xiangyi's friend was even more out of question.

What about the Old Goat?

Just when he was thinking about the Old Goat, someone was being kicked out of a nearby restaurant. 'Wham!' he landed on the ice, and slid seven, eight more feet, and incidentally stopped in front of Lu Xiaofeng.

The man was wearing an inside-out sheepskin coat and a sheepskin cap. Surprisingly, there were two goat horns on his cap. Additionally, his face looked dry, thin, yellowish and old, with sparse goatee on his chin. He indeed looked like an old goat.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at him without showing any emotion on his face, so much so that his eyes did not even blink.

With gasping breath the Old Goat struggled to stand up, while mumbling, "Damn those barbarians. Even if Laoye [master, referring to self] do not have money to drink wine, you, those bastard lambs, did not have to kick me out." Cursing and swearing, he limped away.

Lowering his voice, Lu Xiaofeng instructed Chuchu: "Have Xin Lao'er ['ol two, the second in rank] follow him."

Xin Lao'er was the man expert in qinggong and secret projectile, formerly a direct descendant and disciple of 'Flower Rain' Xin Shi Niang [Tenth Madame Xin].

The one with the ancient sword and dressed in black was surnamed Bai, he was the Lao San [the third]; together with the Huashan disciple, the white-haired old man, they were sworn brothers. Just because many years ago they committed a mistake, Jia Leshan blackmailed them so that they had no other choice but becoming his lackeys. It had been seven, eight years they served Jia Leshan without any opportunity to leave.

This story was told by them, Lu Xiaofeng only listened. Did he truly believe their story? Nobody knows.

‘Eternal Heaven Restaurant’ actually did not have any second story [Translator’s note: the word translated as ‘restaurant’ was actually ‘jiu lou’, jiu – wine, lou – building with more than one floor level]; but without a doubt it was the biggest restaurant in the area, with the most luxurious interior.

Right now the building had become Lu Xiaofeng’s. He only needed a few sentences to close this business deal.

“How much do you make in a day?”

“When business is good, at least three to five taels of silver.”

“Here is a thousand taels of silver, give this building to me. When I am gone, the building is still yours. Will you or will you not agree?”

Of course the restaurant proprietor agreed, moreover, he agreed so quickly. Consequently, the signboard above the door was taken down

promptly, and the business was closed immediately. About an hour later, even the bed was ready to be used. Isn't it true that people with money always handle matters rather conveniently?

The most convenient of all was that wine and food were readily available in this place, complete with a very able chef.

Sitting next to a blazing hot furnace, after several cups of warm wine entered his stomach, Lu Xiaofeng had almost forgotten the bitter cold outside, the cold which would freeze someone's nose and made it fall off.

When he was drinking his third pot of wine, Xin Lao'er came back. Although he was shivering in cold, he could only stand far away at the door, he did not dare to come close to the stove. He knew that if right now he came close to the fire, he might melt away like a popsicle in a hot summer day. If he put his hands into hot water, when he took them out, only bones might remain.

Lu Xiaofeng waited until he caught his breath before asking, "Well?"

Xin Lao'er hatefully said, "That old bastard shouldn't be called the Old Goat, he is more an old fox."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Did you fall into his trick?"

Xin Lao'er: "He knew all along that I was following him, so he deliberately took me circling around the ice several times before he finally turned around and asked if it was you who sent me to see him."

Lu Xiaofeng: "And what did you say?"

Xin Lao'er: "Since he's already known everything, what else can I say?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Where is he now?"

Xin Lao'er: "He is outside, waiting for you. He also said that no matter who, and no matter why you want to see him, since it is you who want him, then you should go and find him yourself."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. With a bitter smile he said, "I don't care if he is an old bastard, an old goat or an old fox; one thing I do know is that his bones must be quite hard."

With his chest puffed out, the Old Goat walked in the front while Lu Xiaofeng followed behind him. It seemed that not only his bones were hard, his skin was also rather thick, because he did not seem to be afraid of the cold at all.

Beyond this strip of main street was a world of ice and snow. The silvery white expanse of ice stretched out ahead as far as eyes could see, with dark waves of snow on either sides. Nothing else was visible amidst the gray and hazy night.

Anybody would feel awful coming from the place with a million lantern lights to this very cold and very dark world. At first Lu Xiaofeng intended to suppress his feelings and simply see what kind of medicine he was going to sell from his bottle of gourd. But finally he could not restrain from asking, "Where are you taking me?"

The Old Goat did not even turn his head, "To my home."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why must we go to your home?"

The Old Goat: "Because you are the one looking for me, I did not look for you."

Lu Xiaofeng could only concede. With a bitter smile he said, "Where is your home?"

The Old Goat: "Inside the giant water barrel."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What kind of place is the giant water barrel?"

The Old Goat: "Giant water barrel is a giant water barrel."

The giant water barrel was indeed a giant water barrel, it was real water barrel to store water.

Lu Xiaofeng had lived for twenty, thirty years, but he had never seen a water barrel this big.

In reality, if he did not come to this place, even if he had lived two, three hundred more years, he would have never seen a water barrel this big.

This water barrel was at least two zhang [about 20 feet or 6 m] tall. It

looked just like a house with a circular ridge roof, or a round canopy. However, it was indeed a water barrel, because it had neither door nor windows. The only opening was at the top, with a piece of rope dangling down from top to bottom.

The Old Goat pulled the rope and climbed up. When he got to the top he beckoned and called out, "Are you coming up or not?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why must I go up? I am not Sima Guang. Even if I want to drink water, I don't need to go into a water barrel like this."

Although he muttered, he climbed up the water barrel anyway.

There was no water inside the water barrel, not even a drop of water.

There was only wine in the water barrel, inside a very large sheepskin bag, wine so strong that if you drink only a mouthful your eyes would water with the burning sensation.

The Old Goat took a mouthful and his eyes brightened.

The water barrel was full of animal skin, piled up randomly everywhere. Hugging a large wineskin he sat comfortably on one of them. After letting out a deep breath he asked, "Have you ever seen such a giant water barrel before?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "No."

The Old Goat: "Have you seen me before?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Also no."

The Old Goat: "But it seems like I have seen you before?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Mmm."

Suddenly the Old Goat laughed, he shook his head and squinting his eyes he said, "No, you are not."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I am not Jia Leshan?"

The Old Goat: "Definitely not."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Then who am I?"

The Old Goat: "I don't care if you are Zhang San or Li Si [Zhang the third or Li the fourth; this is the same as 'Tom, Dick or Harry'], I know you are not Jia Leshan; because I have seen that old bastard lamb once before."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. He did not want to laugh, but he could not help laughing, because he suddenly felt this old fellow was an interesting person.

The Old Goat looked at him from top to bottom, sizing him up. It seemed like he also felt Lu Xiaofeng was an interesting person. People

who had seen Lu Xiaofeng usually would feel that he was an interesting person.

Lu Xiaofeng: "I wish to ask ..."

But the Old Goat suddenly cut him off, "Li Xia is a strange woman, Ding Lao Da [ol' Ding] was even stranger; just because he loved to drink pure water, he has not hesitated to sell his house and spent more than two years to build these two water barrels, so that he could drink pure water during the summer."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Was Ding Lao Da Li Xia's former husband?"

The Old Goat nodded. "Right now Li Xia went missing, but I am sure she has not left this area. I guarantee you she is hiding somewhere in the town. But if you want to ask me where she is, I don't know."

Lu Xiaofeng: "How do you know I am looking for you over this matter?"

The Old Goat: "Don't tell me you are not?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Do you know who I am?"

The Old Goat: "I don't need to know, I don't even want to know. I don't care who you are, you have nothing to do with me at all."

He looked at Lu Xiaofeng with squinted eyes, with a sly laugh he continued, "I feel that you are not an annoying person, that's why I took

you to this place and told you all this. If you want to inquire other matters, you'd better find other people."

But Lu Xiaofeng still asked him, "Did you say that there were originally two water barrels like this?"

The Old Goat: "Uh huh."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Where is the other one?"

The Old Goat: "I don't know."

Lu Xiaofeng: "So other matters you don't know?"

The Old Goat sighed. "I am getting old. So old that I have already forgotten even my own surname and given name. There are a lot of younger men in town, there are also a lot of younger women there. Whatever information you want to inquire, you should go and ask them."

He closed his eyes and took another swig of wine then he laid down comfortably as if he had decided not to give Lu Xiaofeng another look or say another word to him.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed again, "You know I am not Jia Leshan, you know that I know your Ding Lao Da's daughter, that's why you were not the least bit surprised when I mentioned her name. You know for sure that Li Xia has not left, but you kept saying that you did not know anything.

He shook his head, and then laughed again. "Looks like Sin Lao Er is right, you shouldn't be called The Old Goat, actually, you are an old fox."

The Old Goat also laughed. Suddenly he winked at Lu Xiaofeng: "It's all right for you to meet an old fox like me. I do wish you will not meet a fox spirit [or vixen, female fox demon]."

The small wine shop owned by Tang Keqing was called 'Not-going-home-before-drunk Restaurant'.

Although the sky had turned dark for a long time, the night was not too deep yet. By the time Lu Xiaofeng returned, the street was still bright with glorious lantern lights, the 'Not-going-home-before-drunk Restaurant' was still open.

This small wine shop did not look too bad, the lady boss also did not look bad at all, but for some reason the shop was cold and quiet, with no guest inside.

Therefore, the first thing Lu Xiaofeng saw was still this lady whose look was not too pretty, but whose smile was very fascinating. She was still standing below that 'Tai Bai Yi Feng' wooden signboard; she was still smiling sweetly at Lu Xiaofeng, as if she was intentionally waiting for him. Her smile was not only alluring, it was inviting as well.

Lu Xiaofeng had never refused this kind of invitation, furthermore he always believes that girls who loved to smile would also love to talk, and it would be easier for girls who loved to talk to also leak somebody else's secret.

Thereupon Lu Xiaofeng also revealed a smile while slowly walking toward her. He was not sure how to strike a conversation, but contrary to his expectations, Tang Keqing opened her mouth first. "I heard you have bought the Eternal Heaven Restaurant."

Lu Xiaofeng was genuinely amused: "News travel really fast in this place!"

Tang Keqing: "It is a little town, such a big character like you is not commonly seen."

Her smile was indeed too sweet, she might be a real fox-spirit.

Lu Xiaofeng coughed lightly twice. "Not-going-home-before-drunk, does that mean whoever come here to drink must be drunk?"

"That's right," Tang Keqing sweetly replied, "Whoever comes here and does not get drunk must be a turtle."

Lu Xiaofeng: "And if they are drunk?"

Tang Keqing: "Then they must be bastards."

Lu Xiaofeng roared in laughter. "That being the case, whoever comes here to drink must be either a turtle or a bastard. I am afraid nobody would dare to step his foot on your door."

Tang Keqing: "You have clearly bought a restaurant, yet you still come

here to drink. You are not afraid being either a turtle or a bastard; I wonder what is the reason ...?"

Her smile was even sweeter, she looked even more like a fox-spirit.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly discovered that his heart had been moved, he could not stop himself from pulling her hand, "Can you guess why?"

Tang Keqing looked at him with the corner of her eye, "Could it be because of me?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not deny; in fact, he could not deny, because he had already gripped her hand. He gripped her hand really tight.

Her hand was beautiful and soft, but it was icy-cold.

Lu Xiaofeng: "As long as you are willing to accompany me drinking, I don't care if you want me to be drunk or not drunk, I will follow your wish."

Tang Keqing laughed charmingly, "That means, you agree to be either a turtle or a bastard."

Squinting his eyes, Lu Xiaofeng said, "It depends whether you agree or not."

Tang Keqing's face blushed. "You must let my hand go first, so that I can get the wine for you."

Lu Xiaofeng's heart was already beating faster. He was a very healthy man, and recently he had suppressed his desire a bit too long. Moreover, this time he had a very good excuse for his behavior. "I wasn't really a lecherous man, it's just that to gain information, I have no other choice but to use this 'handsome man tactic'."

When he let her hand go, his mind had already started having some fantasy. In the deep of the night, when everything was quiet, two people under the influence of alcohol.

Nobody would have guessed that right this moment, suddenly Tang Keqing raised her hand and gave Lu Xiaofeng a really good slap on his face.

The slap did not land squarely on his face, but naturally Lu Xiaofeng was extremely shocked.

"What are you doing?"

"What am I doing?" Tang Keqing's face grew ashen; with a cold laugh she said, "I just want to ask you: What in the hell are you doing? What kind of woman do you think I am? Just because you have a bit of stinky money, you think you can bully women anytime you wish? Let me tell you: in this place I only sell wine, I don't sell anything else."

The more she talked, the angrier she got, until finally she stomped her feet and roared, "Go away! Just roll out of here! If next time you dare to step into my door, let's see if I won't break your dog legs with a stick."

To suddenly receive a curse like that, Lu Xiaofeng was greatly startled. But in his heart he also understood why not even a ghost dares to visit this place.

Turned out although this woman looked as sweet as honey, she was actually hotter than chili pepper. Moreover, she also had another shortcoming, *i.e.* she was abusive toward men; she must see a man suffer before she could be happy.

Therefore, she was always standing on the door, seducing the male passer-by; and then when a man was hooked, she would pinch the man half-dead in the palm of her hand, just like one pinches a mosquito.

Evidently the number of men in this place who had received troubles from her, who had been beaten by her, was not just a few. Lu Xiaofeng could be considered lucky that he was able to get out from that place in one piece.

Fortunately, nobody else was outside. In a place where dripping water would turn into ice instantly, not many people would be strolling leisurely on the street.

When Lu Xiaofeng walked in, he looked like a horny tycoon; when he walked out, he looked like a fool.

"Women ..." he sighed inwardly, "Why would there be so many aggravating women in this world?"

He had not thought of what would the world turn into if there were no women in it when suddenly he heard a miserable cry.

The cry came from inside the drugstore across the street. It was a man's voice.

Lu Xiaofeng rushed toward the store. The thin and small, cold and indifferent Leng Hong'er was pinning down a big man on a chair, with one hand pinching on his shoulder blade and the other hand twisting the man's arm behind his back, while coldly asked, "Where exactly is your sprained muscle? Where is the dislodged joint? Tell me!"

The man gritted his teeth; he could barely open his mouth, "I ... I don't ..."

Leng Hong'er: "Then why did you come? You wanted to massage me? To loosen my bones?"

The man could only nod; he could not deny, yet he did not dare to admit.

Leng Hong'er let out a cold laugh, then she raised her hand, and just like a small rubber ball, this big man was thrown outside the door. 'Bang!' he fell on the cold, hard and slippery ice outside.

This time he truly sprained his muscle and dislodge his joint from the fall, and could only go home and probably vent his anger to his wife.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled ruefully inside; this time he wondered whether it

was the man who was at fault? Or was it the woman who had the shortcoming?

Leng Hong'er stood on the other side of the street, looking at him with cold eyes. "Are you here to have me to treat your illness as well?"

With a forced smile Lu Xiaofeng shook his head, and then simply turned around to leave.

'Within the thirty-sixth stratagems, running away was the most important.' Suddenly he discovered that the women of this place must not be provoked.

Who would have thought that he did not want to provoke others, others wanted to provoke him instead.

Suddenly Leng Hong'er blocked his way. "What is it that you actually want by coming here? Why are you unwilling to speak?"

Forcing a smile Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Why would I want to speak?"

Leng Hong'er bit her lips and stared at him. "Even if you don't speak, I know what's in your heart; you must think that I am cold and ferocious, that I am also a problematic woman."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I do not have such thoughts."

This time he was obviously lying, because he indeed had those

thoughts in his heart.

Leng Hong'er was still biting her lips, she was also still staring at him, but from her pair of cold eyes two drops of tears like pearls rolled down her cheeks.

A woman like her could also cry? Lu Xiaofeng was taken aback, "What is it?"

Leng Hong'er lowered her head with tears streaming down her face. "Nothing, I ... I just don't feel well."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Don't feel well?" – You beat others until they are rolling in pain on the ground? You don't feel well? What about the people you have beaten?

Obviously Leng Hong'er could not hear what he said in his heart, she continued, "You came from a different part of the country, you did not know what kind of men live in this place. They saw me, a single woman, live here, they always find ways to bully me, humiliate me."

When she cried, she looked even more petite, even weaker; her cruel and cold look vanished without a trace that she looked like a little girl who had suffered injustice.

She continued, "If they succeed in bullying me just one time, I would forever not be able to live a respectable life, because not only other people would not blame them, they would say that I am a flower beckoning to the bees and drawing butterflies near. Therefore, I can only put on a

façade of cold and indifferent manner. But in the dead of the night, I ... I also ..."

She could not continue; she did not need to continue.

When the night was deep and quiet, she was alone in an empty room, she did not need to explain that kind of desolate, lonely and dark feeling because Lu Xiaofeng understood it well.

He suddenly felt that that the frail little girl standing in front of him not only should not be feared, but also very pitiful.

Quietly Leng Hong'er wiped her tears, she seemed to force a smile when she said, "We have just met; actually, I shouldn't say this kind of words in front of a stranger."

"It's all right," Lu Xiaofeng immediately said, "I also have too many concerns. Sometimes I also want to unload my burdens to a total stranger."

Leng Hong'er lifted up her head to look at him, with a tender voice she asked, "Can you unload your burdens to me?"

The tears on her eyes had not dried up; standing in front of him, she looked even smaller and feebler.

If Lu Xiaofeng was thinking of leaving then, he could not leave now – Why is it that invitation that comes with tears is always more difficult to refuse than invitation that comes with a smile?

Steaming hot pickled Chinese cabbage, plain boiled pork, and a dish of intestine hotpot, and some Green Bamboo Leaf wine, warmed at just the right temperature.

"I brought this wine from the inland, and so far I always drink it sparingly."

The tears on Leng Hong'er's face had dried up. Right now she was setting the table, arranging the food and wine; she looked as busy as a little sparrow.

"Every night I would drink a bit of wine alone. My drinking capacity has always been low, but I can sleep only after I get drunk."

And then she also made a confession to Lu Xiaofeng, "Sometimes sleep would still elude me even when I am drunk. On those nights I would go out and sit on the ice of the frozen river, waiting for dawn. There was one night I saw a bear. At least I thought it was a bear, its body was covered in thick and stiff black hair."

Her drinking capacity was indeed not good. Only after two cups of wine, her face turned as red as sunset clouds.

Looking at her, Lu Xiaofeng sighed inwardly. Such a little girl unexpectedly must sit on the ice looking at a black bear; it was truly a pitiful matter.

Just when he started to feel her pain, by a strange coincidence her

hand was moving in front of him. Thereupon he grabbed her hand.

Her hand was small and delicate, but also burning hot.

The room was as warm as springtime, the bottle on the table still contained some preserved plum, outside the cold wind was screaming, but the window was tightly closed.

Her heart was beating faster.

Lu Xiaofeng was not clear how it happened, but suddenly he felt she had fallen into his bosom. Her petite and delicate body was as hot as a clump of fire, but her lips were icy cold. She was cold, and fragrant, and tender.

Until a very long time afterwards, Lu Xiaofeng was still unable to figure out how this happened.

"Actually, what happened that day?" someone would ask him.

"Technically, nothing really happened," Lu Xiaofeng would reply, he could not but admit, "It was not because I was a gentleman, but rather because ..." Because when something was about to happen; they suddenly heard somebody clapping and cheering.

"So someone applauded you at that kind of moment?" Whoever heard this story in the future would always think that it was extremely hilarious. "Obviously it was because the two of you had displayed such a brilliant performance."

Yet Lu Xiaofeng had to admit that this applause did indeed scare them; as a matter of fact, both of them did indeed spring up in fright so that they crashed into the table and tumbled the hotpot over.

“Who applauded?”

“It was the big bastard, the one wearing red gown, the big bastard who wore green cap [meaning: a man whose wife cheated on him].”

Li Shentong was standing at the door, looking at them and giggled: “Gentleman and Lady must not stop; it was such a splendid performance, which I have not seen for many years. If you are willing to continue and let me watch for a while, I am going to invite you for some soup dinner tomorrow.”

All in all, he did not speak even one obscene word, but to Lu Xiaofeng’s ears, it was the most nauseating words he had ever heard for as long as he had lived.

He almost could not stop himself from pouncing over and give this half-real, half-fake lunatic a good slap on the face. He did not have to pounce over because Leng Hong’er had preceded him in pouncing over. This petite and delicate, tender and frail woman had suddenly turned into a mother wolf, her actions were malicious and vicious.

Lu Xiaofeng knew she knew martial arts, but he had never thought that her martial art skills were very good. Her movements were swift and ruthless. Within the seventy-two ways of grappling technique, she had mastered some skills in spraining muscle and dislocating bones. If any

part of Li Shentong's body was grabbed by her, two kinds of sound would definitely be heard – the noise of shattering bones and the painful scream of a pig being slaughtered.

Yet Li Shentong did not give her any opportunity to touch even the corner of his clothes.

His painting might be awful, his attire might be very funny, but his martial art skill was not funny at all.

Even Lu Xiaofeng had no choice but to admit that compared to people anywhere, anyplace, his martial art skill could be considered first class.

Such an able individual, why did he act like an idiot, hiding under his own older sister's skirt and let himself ran over by other people everywhere? Why didn't he get out to the world on his own? Could it be that his Jiejie's [older sister] martial art skill was stronger than his?

Lu Xiaofeng looked up and happened to see Li Shentong's hand had just moved away from Leng Hong'er's breasts. Followed by Leng Hong'er dashed to the door. It was not until she was out of the door did he hear her crying.

Lu Xiaofeng felt anger rising in his breast. With his hands tightly curled into fists, he determined to give this man a really good lesson.

Unexpectedly, Li Shentong laughed. He waved his hand and laughed: "You must not come over. I know I cannot beat you, I also know who you are."

With a maintained composure Lu Xiaofeng said, "You know?"

Li Shentong laughed: "You can hide the truth from others, but you cannot hide it from me. It will still be useless even if you add more beards. I know you are that Four-eyebrowed Lu Xiaofeng."

Lu Xiaofeng halted his steps with a start.

He arrived in this place less than four hours ago, and had met with only five people, but all these five people had astonished him tremendously. It seemed like the people of this place were not simple at all. If he wanted to bring the Luocho Tablet back, it might not be an easy task after all.

Li Shentong's smile was getting wider: "But you need not worry, I will definitely not reveal this secret, because we are on the same side. I have been waiting for you for a long time."

Lu Xiaofeng was even more astonished: "You knew I was coming?"

Li Shentong: "Blue Beard has said that he would certainly send you over, and I very much believe his words."

Finally Lu Xiaofeng understood; he also recalled what Blue Beard had said, "... even if you cannot find her, there will be someone who will lead you to her ... when you get there, someone will make a contact with you."

Li Shentong laughed, "I am sure you did not think that I would betray

my Jiejie and be Blue Beard's spy."

Lu Xiaofeng coldly said, "But I am not too surprised. Someone like you, is there any kind of job you can't do?"

Unexpectedly, Li Shentong sighed and said, "When you see that precious Jiejie of mine, you will understand why I am doing this."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What can I do to be able to see her?"

Li Shentong: "Only one way."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What way?"

Li Shentong: "Quickly deliver those boxes you brought with you?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You don't know where she is hiding?"

Li Shentong: "I don't."

He sighed again then with a bit a rueful smile he said, "Other than shiny white silver and bright yellow gold, she doesn't know anything else, not even her own family."

Lu Xiaofeng stared hard at him for a long time, enough to drink a cup of tea. Suddenly he asked, "Do you want to take a beating?"

Of course Li Shentong did not want to.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Then you'd better eat everything spilled on the floor. If I find out that you leave even one piece of food, I will make sure that you'd regret it for the rest of your life."

The hotpot was knocked over, pickled Chinese cabbage, plain boiled pork, black pudding, were scattered on the floor, which quickly became a layer of white oil.

Li Shentong bitterly bent his waist and went down on his knees. Lu Xiaofeng slowly walked out. When he got to the door he heard Li Shentong throwing up.

The night was very deep; the brilliant lantern lights were getting sparse, the magnificent little town was shrouded in cold darkness.

The cold wind was blowing from the frozen river, from a distance came the howling of a pack of wolves, a cold and desolate howl, making the hearts of those who heard it also turn cold.

Where did Leng Hong'er go? Did she go to sit on the frozen river, waiting for the black bear to pass by?

In her mind, what did the black bear symbolize? Did it symbolize mankind's primitive desire?

Lu Xiaofeng did not feel well. Not only he did not feel good about her, but also he did not feel good about himself. Why does mankind always

suffer by his own desire?

The lanterns at the Eternal Heaven Restaurant were still shining. The light leaked out from the crack on the door. The cold wind also carried an intermittent whiff of warm aroma.

Lu Xiaofeng's forehead creased into a frown. He knew waiting for him inside were pickled Chinese cabbage, plain boiled pork, and black pudding hotpot, plus one weird girl.

In that instant he really wished he could simply run to the frozen river, waiting for the black bear to pass by.

Also, right that instant he saw a shadow dash out from the back of the Eternal Heaven Restaurant. The shadow immediately disappeared in the darkness.

The shadow's qinggong was really not below Lu Xiaofeng's. Was there a qinggong master of this caliber in this kind of place?

Lu Xiaofeng frowned, again. The door opened. A pair of laughing eyes was looking at him from the threshold. With a giggle she said, "Finally you remembered to go back. I thought you have died on that woman's tummy."

Steaming hot hotpot and some Green Bamboo Leaf wine, warmed at just the right temperature, Chuchu's smile was truly very sweet: "I brought this wine from the inland ..."

Lu Xiaofeng just wanted to run away; he could not take it anymore, the same dishes, the same wine, the same woman. Even more unbearable, they talked the same.

Whatever she was going to say next, he did not want to listen – the same idle talk, the same boring people ...

He sprang up suddenly: "Hurry up, tell your men to deliver it quickly."

Chuchu was startled, "Deliver what? Deliver to where?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Quickly deliver those boxes to the Silver Hook Casino."

The seven, eight zhang wide room had been divided by wooden boards into seven, eight smaller rooms. In the biggest room the biggest bed was prepared, with the thickest bed quilt spread over it.

Lu Xiaofeng was lying on this bed, blanketed by the thick quilt, yet the cold was still unbearable.

Everybody must have had a time when they were feeling downcast. He was also a man. This time he only felt that he had thrown the business into a total mess. He wished he could simply give himself three thousand eight hundred slaps on the face, and then punish himself by kneeling to the Heaven three hundred eighty times, and finally buy a block of tofu and smash his own head to death.

People were moving the boxes outside, amidst the noises of their yawns and sneezes.

It was the third hour of the night [between 3 – 5am], to drag people out of their warm beds and order them to move boxes was probably not their idea of having a good life. Why haven't these people died? But why must they die?

To stay alive was not only one's right, it was also one's duty. Nobody has neither the power nor the authority to destroy others, just like nobody has any right to destroy oneself.

Lu Xiaofeng tossed and turned in his bed, wishing that sleep would come earlier. It's a pity that waiting for sleep was just like waiting for a woman. The more anxious you are for her to come a bit earlier, the later she would come to you. Why are there so many matters in life just like that?

Suddenly he heard a crashing noise outside, followed by people shouting in shock.

Lu Xiaofeng sprang up from his bed and grabbed his coat, without having any time to put on his shoes. With bare feet he dashed outside, only to see several big men, who were carrying the boxes, standing around, looking at a box as if they had lost their minds.

The box had fallen to the floor that its lid was opened and the all its contents were scattered around. Shockingly, the contents were neither gold nor silver, but blocks of bricks.

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked.

Tonight, it was the sixth time he was startled. This time not only he was shocked, he was angered as well, because he felt he had been cheated, and naturally the feeling of being cheated was not a pleasant one.

Chuchu, however, did not even bat her eye, she said unenthusiastically, "Why are you standing around looking like fools? The fall did not hurt the bricks the least bit. Quickly put them back and deliver them."

"Deliver them?" Lu Xiaofeng coldly asked, "Deliver to where?"

Chuchu: "Of course deliver them to the Silver Hook Casino."

With a cold laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "You want to trade other people's LuoCha Tablet with bricks? Do you think other people are that stupid?"

Chuchu: "It is exactly because that Miss Chen is not stupid that I can simply deliver these boxes just like this. If she really knows how to judge the quality of goods, once she look at these boxes, she won't say anything."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Are those other boxes also filled with bricks?"

Chuchu: "Exactly the same bricks, but ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "But what?"

Chuchu smiled, "Although the boxes are filled with bricks, but the boxes

are made of pure gold. We are taking this much gold, travelling over such a long distance, there is no harm in being a bit more cautious."

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbfounded. He suddenly discovered that the only fool around was probably himself.

The rest of the boxes were quickly loaded and delivered. Lu Xiaofeng was still standing barefooted, with a baffled look on his face.

Chuchu looked at him then sweetly said, "I know you are really mad at me. I know."

She knew under his coat Lu Xiaofeng did not wear anything else. She walked over, untied his robe, and leaned her head against his naked chest. With her arms tight around his waist, she whispered tenderly, "But tonight I won't make you angry. I certainly won't."

Lu Xiaofeng looked down at the top of her long-hair covering head. He looked at her for a long time before he suddenly asked, "What made you change your mind?"

In a gentle voice Chuchu said, "I always do things I am happy about. Before, I was not happy that I had to accompany you, but now ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "But now you are happy to be with me?"

Chuchu: "Mmm."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. Suddenly he picked her up and carried to his bedroom, and threw her on the bed as hard as he could, then turned around and left.

Chuchu leaped up from the bed and shouted, "What do you mean by this?"

Without even looking back Lu Xiaofeng indifferently said, "I don't have any other meaning except to tell you one thing: this kind of matter takes two people to be both happy. Although right now you are happy, I am not."

That night, Lu Xiaofeng still slept alone, but his sleep was sweet. At long last he managed to vent off his frustration. When he woke up the next day, he felt his appetite was extremely good, he felt as if he could swallow an entire whale.

Although it was already high noon, Chuchu was still hiding inside her bedroom. It was not clear whether she was still asleep or she was still angry.

Surprisingly, he also had not heard anything from the Silver Hook Casino.

Lu Xiaofeng wolfed down his breakfast and lunch. The meal made his face glow with health, his spirit rose; therefore, he made a special effort to visit the kitchen and give his compliments to the chef.

When his heart was happy, he always hoped that others can also be

similarly happy.

Just before leaving, he patted the chef's shoulder and said with a laugh, "If you move inland and open up a restaurant, I guarantee you will get rich. Those who are accustomed to eat fish nuggets and deep-fried potato chips would happily climb the wall just so that they can eat your big chunks of roast mutton."

The chef looked at him walking out the door with heart brimming with gratitude; in his heart he wished Lu Xiaofeng to have good luck in whatever endeavor he might have to do today.

Lu Xiaofeng also believed that he would definitely have the good luck today.

Chapter 7 – Demoness with Lascivious Heart

Although the lantern had not been lighted, the silver hook kept swaying in the wind.

Lu Xiaofeng walked in big strides toward the Silver Hook Casino, with a feeling that his luck would guarantee his success that day; he almost could not restrain himself from stopping at one of the tables and throwing some money.

He did not stop, because he did not want to waste his luck on a gambling table.

Li Shentong had seen him walk in from afar, so he hastily stole away. Today he seemed to be a bit sick, his face was yellowish, his body thin, and he looked downcast. Perhaps he threw up all night last night.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled as he walked in straight toward the door with a sign that said 'Important place of accounting office, idle person must not enter'*. Two large men immediately blocked his way.

One of the men pointed to the sign on the door and calmly said, 'Do you or do you not recognize characters?'"*

Lu Xiaofeng smiled: "Characters, I know some, but I am not an idle person, I am a very, very sweet person."

[Translator's note: Just to let you know that Eliza and I have given this

part some thought. I can simply translate the two sentences with asterisk (*) above as 'Private, Do Not Enter', and "Can't you read?" respectively, but then, Lu Xiaofeng's reply would not make any sense. Therefore, awkward as it may, we decided to keep it as it is. Additional note (courtesy of Justin13): the character 'idle' sounds like 'salty', hence the 'sweet' joke.]

The man was startled, but before he realized what has happened, Lu Xiaofeng already walked past him. He was thinking of stretching out his arm to block, but suddenly his waist went numb and his entire body went weak that he could not even lift up his finger.

Chen Jingjing was indeed inside the room, as was Li Shentong. Seeing Lu Xiaofeng, both forced a smile.

Lu Xiaofeng also smiled, "Good morning."

Chen Jingjing: "It's not morning anymore."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Since you know it is not morning anymore, why haven't you sent me any news?"

Chen Jingjing coughed lightly twice: "We are thinking of inviting Master Jia for a simple dinner tonight."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I have never eaten simple dinner, I only eat full course banquet."

Chen Jingjing forced a laugh: "Certainly. It will be a full course banquet. When the time comes, Li Dajie [big sister] will also be here."

Lu Xiaofeng: "But since I am already here, I want to eat now."

Chen Jingjing: "What can we do, then?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Simple, you go and tell that Li Dajie of yours to come and see me. If she does not come, I am going to cut her brother's two ears and one nose."

Li Shentong's countenance changed. Chen Jingjing's smile was even more forced. "It's too bad that we do not know where she is; how could we go and tell her?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You don't know where she is, but I do know a bit, actually."

Chen Jingjing: "Oh?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "There were originally two giant water barrels in this place, but now only one is left outside, where did the other one go?"

Chen Jingjing's countenance seemed to change a little bit.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Where that water barrel is, there will Li Xia be."

Chen Jingjing: "What are you talking about? I do not understand."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I am sure you do. Unless you are crazy, nobody would sell

a house just to make two giant water barrels only to collect rain water to drink."

Chen Jingjing agreed with this point of his, she could not disagree.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Ding Lao Da was not crazy, obviously he had a different motive."

Chen Jingjing: "What do you think his motive was?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Li Xia and he eloped to this place, because they were afraid other people would pursue, they made that kind of water barrels, and were prepared to hide inside the water barrels."

Chen Jingjing: "People can live inside the water barrel to hide?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Normally, absolutely not. But if you freeze the water barrel inside the river, you won't find a better hiding place, because nobody would guess that some people are hiding inside the frozen river."

Chen Jingjing wanted to smile, but she failed. Li Shentong could not bear not to ask, "Do you know where that water barrel is?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded, with his foot he tapped the wooden board covering the floor, "In here."

Chen Jingjing looked at Li Shentong, Li Shentong looked at Chen Jingjing. But before they opened their mouths, someone underneath the

board had already replied.

A deep and low, hoarse female voice coldly said, "Since you already know I am here, why haven't you come down?"

Unexpectedly, the water barrel, which was over two zhang tall, had been divided into two levels. The lower level was completely covered with soft fur, just like a comfortable bed. There was a small ladder connecting this bed with the level above it, which served as the living room. There were a table and a chair, with the wall all around covered with thick carpet in random pattern. There was even an exquisitely made bronze stove.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. He fantasized that if he could live in here for several days with a girl that he likes, then those days would certainly feel like a dream.

A middle-aged woman, whose appearance could not be considered too ugly, was sitting on the other side, staring at him.

This woman's hair was very neatly combed, very bright. Her face was square, her cheek bones high, her lips very thick, and her pores were large; plus she maintained a very solemn expression. In short, she did not have even one attractive feature.

Others may feel that she was not ugly, perhaps because of her eyes. When she was staring at other people, her eyes seemed to be covered with a hazy layer of mist. If you have never seen her, you would never guess that this kind of pair of eyes could belong to this kind of face.

"I am Li Xia," she stared at Lu Xiaofeng, "And you must be Jia Leshan."

Lu Xiaofeng nodded.

Li Xia: "Do you know that people say that you are an old fox?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I certainly am."

Li Xia: "But you don't look old."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "Because I know a way to make a man always look young."

Li Xia: "What is it?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Women."

Li Xia's eyes seemed to be gleaming with laughter, "Sounds like your method is not bad at all."

Lu Xiaofeng also stared at her. He smiled, "You also don't look old."

Li Xia: "Oh?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "What method do you use to maintain your looks?"

Li Xia's countenance fell. With a cold laugh she said, "Do you think I use men?"

Lu Xiaofeng dryly said, "As long as you don't use me, whatever method you use is none of my business."

Li Xia started to stare at him again; her eyes revealed a very strange feeling when she suddenly called out loudly, "Get the wine!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I am not here to drink."

Li Xia: "But you must drink."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why?"

Li Xia: "Because I want you to drink. The thing that you want is in my hands."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed inwardly, because his nose smelled a very familiar aroma.

The aroma of pickled Chinese cabbage, plain boiled pork, and a dish of intestine hotpot.

He nearly fainted.

The steaming hot hotpot and Green Bamboo Leaf wine, warmed at just

the right temperature.

Before Li Xia said anything, Lu Xiaofeng had already opened his mouth, "Naturally you brought this wine from the inland, and so far you always drink it sparingly." He thought Li Xia would be greatly surprised that he knew exactly what she was going to say.

Who would have thought that Li Xia shook her head and said, "Wrong. This wine was brought by your woman. I have not drunk it, because I am afraid there is poison in the wine."

Lu Xiaofeng could only force a smile. Everybody makes mistakes. With a bitter smile he said, "And so you want me to drink it first?"

Li Xia did not deny at all. Lu Xiaofeng raised a cup and poured it down his throat.

He was born with a rather strange natural instinct; his feeling was far keener than most people. If the wine was poisonous, as soon as it wet his lips, he could feel it. Otherwise, he would have been dead of poisoning several hundred times.

Li Xia suddenly asked, "I heard your woman is not bad at all. What is her name?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Chuchu."

Li Xia coldly said, "You already have such a pretty woman, yet you are still reaching to the east and pulling to the west, that you won't even let

other people's wives alone?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "Seems to me Hong'er and Little Tang are not other people's wives anymore. I love women."

Li Xia suddenly smiled, "Right now I also am no longer another man's wife, and I am also a woman."

Lu Xiaofeng bluntly said, "It's too bad that in my eyes you are no more than someone who is doing business with me."

Li Xia: "But now our business deal is done."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Seems to me it is not. Although I have paid you the money, you have not delivered the goods."

Li Xia: "Don't worry, you want the goods, tomorrow first thing in the morning I will deliver it to you."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why do I have to wait for tomorrow morning?"

Li Xia only poured a cup of wine and slowly drank it. Her eyes revealed that very strange feeling again as she slowly said, "We are both adults, we don't need to play games like little children do."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I am not thinking of playing games."

Li Xia: "The men around here are as stinky and filthy as donkeys, they have not taken a bath in several months. I feel like throwing up just by looking at them. But you ... you ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "But I what?"

Li Xia: "Not only you look a lot younger than I imagined, your body seems to be this sturdy, so strong."

The hazy mist in her eyes was growing denser, her breathing also suddenly became rapid. "What I want, don't you understand?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I don't understand at all."

Biting her lip, Li Xia said, "I am also a woman, and all women must have men, but I ... I haven't had any man for several months. I ..."

She panted hard. Suddenly she leaned this way and her hand grabbed Lu Xiaofeng's hand.

Her grip was so tight that her nails dug into Lu Xiaofeng's flesh.

Beads of sweat started to form on her face; her nostrils flared up and down, as she was continuously gasping for breath. The pupil of her eyes gradually grew, sending out warmth like a vast expanse of water ...

Lu Xiaofeng did not move.

He had seen this kind of expression before. It was only when a woman was burning with desire that her face would show this kind of expression. But right now she did nothing more than gripping his hand.

In this moment he suddenly understood why she eloped with Ding Lao Da, and why she married the Blue Beard.

Without any doubt she was a woman whose desire was insatiable, and she was at the age where a woman's desire was the strongest.

Although she was not beautiful, she was the type of woman who created a strange attraction on the opposite sex; especially her thick and meaty lips, would lead a man to associate those lips with some primal lust.

Lu Xiaofeng had not moved.

But even he had to admit that his heart was beginning to move.

His Adam's apple was moving up and down, his mouth suddenly became dry. He was thinking of leaving, but Li Xia had thrown her body into his, pressing him hard, entangled his body just like an octopus holding him down, never would let him go.

Even Lu Xiaofeng had never seen a woman whose desire was so intense. He nearly could not breathe. Her hand suddenly started to move, she grabbed hard on his ...

Suddenly 'Bang!' the wooden board above them opened, with a throaty

voice someone was shouting, "Let me in, I want to go in! I will kill whoever dares to stop me!"

Lu Xiaofeng was startled, Li Xia sat up, but did not stop her labored breathing. A woman jumped down from above. Her round face was twisted with anger. Lu Xiaofeng almost did not recognize the woman who always stood under the 'Tai Bai Legacy' signboard to entice men to be crushed on her butcher block, Tang Keqing.

"It's you ..." Li Xia sprang up and indignantly said, "What are you doing here? Get out!"

Tang Keqing stared at her hatefully and icily said, "I won't get out. Why can't I come to this place? You forbid me from touching men, why are you cheating with a man in here?"

Li Xia was even more enraged, she sternly said, "It's none of your business! Whatever I am doing is none of your business!"

Tang Keqing also shouted, "Who said it's none of my business? You are mine, and I forbid any man to touch you."

Li Xia abruptly raised one palm and gave her a hard slap on her face that immediately several purple streaks appeared on her cheek. But suddenly she pounced and wrestled Li Xia, just like Li Xia wrestled Lu Xiaofeng just a moment ago.

"I want you. Even if you beat me to death I still want you." Like rain Li Xia's fists were beating on her body, but she still did not let her go. "I am

as good as any man, and you know it, why do you ...”

Lu Xiaofeng did not want to hear it anymore, he did not want to see even more; to him, what was happening was pitiful, laughable and disgusting.

Quietly he slipped out, while gaining an understanding of why Tang Keqing hated men so much and wanted to abuse them.

He could not help but feeling nauseated recalling that he had held her hand.

All of a sudden it was evening.

Lu Xiaofeng did not even know when the sky was beginning to turn dark. He did not return to the Eternal Heaven Restaurant; he simply stopped by at a wine shop on the street and bought a big pot of wine and sat alone to drink it.

His heart was brimming with sorrow and dismay, he was even more dejected than last night, because although he realized that there was always the dark and ugly side on everybody's life, he had never wanted to see that side.

It was an uninhabited little wooden hut by the bank of the river. Presumably the inhabitants of that hut had moved to the little town on the frozen river. The door of this hut was almost completely buried under the ice and snow.

The cold wind blew in from the cracks on the window, from the cracks on the door, from the gaps on the wooden planks. The cold wind was as sharp as blade.

But he did not care.

He only hoped Li Xia would keep her promise and delivered the LuoCha Tablet early in the morning tomorrow. And he would leave as soon as he got it.

When he first arrived, he felt that this place was glorious and beautiful, with new and wonderful excitement everywhere.

But now he just wanted to leave, the sooner the better.

There was still an oil lamp on the shabby wooden table. There seemed to be a little bit of oil left in the lamp.

But he had no desire whatsoever to light the lamp. Even he himself did not understand why these past two days he was in such a bad mood, so much so that he wished he could find Gu Song to have a drinking competition with him.

Strangely, as soon as they got here, Sui Han San You seemed to suddenly vanish from the surface of the earth.

Viewed from a distance, the little town on the ice was still brilliantly illuminated. Darkness came early in this place. It must still be very early in the evening, which means tomorrow morning was still quite some time

away.

How would he spend this long night?

Lu Xiaofeng grabbed the wine pot, but then he put it back down. Suddenly he heard very light footsteps on the ice and snow outside.

At a moment like this, who could have come to a place like this?

Suddenly the window was struck open then someone jumped in. The door was completely blocked by the ice, Lu Xiaofeng also leaped over the window to get in.

By the dim reflection of the light on the snow, he was able to vaguely see that this person was wearing a long and oversized fur coat, carrying a large bundle in her hand. 'Bang!' She placed the bundle on the table, and then with hands shaking from the cold, she took a flint and lighted the oil lamp on the table.

Only then did she turned her head around to face Lu Xiaofeng and smiled, "I did not guess wrong. You are indeed in here."

Her face was frozen white, her nose was frozen red, but her smile was as gentle, tender and beautiful as a spring flower. It was Chen Jingjing.

But Lu Xiaofeng seemed to be unfazed, only he could not bear not to ask, "How did you guess that I am here?"

Chen Jingjing smiled sweetly, "I saw you with a pot of wine walking toward this direction. I know that around here, only this place can be used to take shelter from the cold. Although I am not smart, I am not stupid either."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Are you especially looking for me?"

Chen Jingjing: "Mmm."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why are you looking for me?"

Chen Jingjing pointed toward the bundle on the table: "To deliver this food and wine for you."

She smiled as she untied the bundle, while continuing, "You are, after all, our guest. Naturally I cannot let you starve."

Lu Xiaofeng looked coldly at her then frostily said, "You shouldn't have come."

Chen Jingjing: "Why not?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because I am a sex maniac, aren't you afraid I ..."

Chen Jingjing did not let him finish, she smiled and said, "Why would I come if I was afraid?"

Those few words, if it was Ding Xiangyi, she would have said it enticingly, full of passion. If it was Chuchu, those words would have come out as a challenge.

But her manner was very calm and natural, because she was just stating the fact – I know you are a gentleman, that's why I come; I also know that you will treat me as a gentleman would.

This matter should be as obvious as 'two plus two is four', plain and simple.

Under normal circumstances, when a woman resorts to this kind of approach in dealing with men, she should be considered smart. Too bad Lu Xiaofeng's circumstance right now was not normal.

Not only he was dejected to the extreme right now, he was very mad. He was mad at Chuchu, mad at Li Xia, mad at Tang Keqing, and even madder at himself. He felt that in the last two days, in everything he did he deserved to get spanked three hundred times with a plank. As a matter of fact, these past few days he seemed to feel uncomfortable all over his body.

Chen Jingjing added: "I specially bring some 'wind chicken' and preserved meat for you. You should eat a little bit."

Lu Xiaofeng's gaze was fixed at her as he slowly said, "I only want one thing."

Chen Jingjing: "What do you want to eat?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Eat you."

There was no resistance, there was no escaping, nor there was any attempt on her part to push him away. Regardless of what was going to happen, she seemed to be fully prepared to accept her fate.

Her response was not too enthusiastic, but she was not cold either. She was like an ordinary woman under any ordinary circumstance, being approached by her man, as if it was as it should be; such a simple and natural matter.

And now that the excitement had subsided, she slowly got up and tidied up herself. Suddenly she turned toward Lu Xiaofeng, laughed, and said softly, "And now what do you want to eat?"

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed, "Right now I can eat anything. If you have brought an entire cow in here, I might swallow it all down."

The two of them laughed as they gazed at each other. Something that should have caused remorse and hatred to others had suddenly turned into a joyous and pleasing experience.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at her. Other than peaceful and serene joy, his heart was also brimming with gratitude.

All uncomfortable feelings suddenly disappeared like snow melting under the sun. Suddenly he felt his entire body was very comfortable – oftentimes the change a woman can bring to a man's body is just like a

miracle.

Chen Jingjing's eyes were gleaming with that kind of radiance, the feeling of joy and amazement. "Finally I understand something."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What is it?"

Chen Jingjing: "No matter how good the dish is, if you don't put salt in it, it would certainly be very unpalatable."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "Extremely unpalatable, definitely."

Chen Jingjing: "Men are just the same."

Lu Xiaofeng was confused, "How can men be the same?"

Chen Jingjing sweetly said, "No matter how good a man is, if he does not have a woman, he would be spoiled, would be extremely unpalatable."

Her face still had that kind of blush, which made other's heart beat faster; her sweet smile was like the sunset glow of early summer night.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart was also beating faster, and he reached out to pull her hand.

But this time Chen Jingjing deftly evaded his hand, and with a somber

expression said, "Actually, I am here to tell you something."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

Chen Jingjing: "Because I knew you were such in a bad mood that I did not dare to tell you."

Lu Xiaofeng: "And now you are ready to tell me?"

Chen Jingjing slowly nodded her head. Obviously she was able to see that his emotions were now very stable. "I only hope that you won't get too upset after hearing it."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I won't get upset. Quickly tell me."

Although in the mouth he said he was not upset, his heart was already anxious.

Finally Chen Jingjing sighed and said, "Little Tang is dead. She died under Li Xia's hand."

Lu Xiaofeng frowned. "Li Xia killed her? Why?"

Chen Jingjing: "I don't know."

Lu Xiaofeng: "You did not ask her?"

Chen Jingjing: "I did not ask, because Li Xia has disappeared, this time she really disappeared. We have searched for her for a long time, and could not find even her shadow."

She had not finished speaking, Lu Xiaofeng had already sprang up.

Chen Jingjing: "I knew that when you heard this news, you would jump up, because other than her, nobody else knows where she hid the LuoCha Tablet."

Lu Xiaofeng jumped again, he jumped even higher.

Chen Jingjing: "Those twelve boxes, she personally sent people who packed them off. Nobody knows where she had those boxes delivered to."

Lu Xiaofeng yelled, "This kind of matter, why did you wait until now to tell me?"

Chen Jingjing smiled ruefully, "I told you just now, and you already jumped eight feet high. If I told you then, I wouldn't be surprised if you punch my nose till it crooked."

Lu Xiaofeng sat back down; he did not jump, and he did not yell.

Chen Jingjing: "Was it because of me that you agreed to hand the boxes over?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Mmm."

Chen Jingjing: "Now your boxes are gone, she also disappeared. Tell me, what should I do?"

Lu Xiaofeng coldly replied, "You have already found a very good way to shut my mouth."

Chen Jingjing hung her head down, looking at her own toes, and quietly said, "If you think that I did what I did just to shut your mouth, you are wrong. Do you think I cannot disappear as well if I am afraid you will find me to settle the account?"

Her eyes turned red, her tears were ready to fall.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart softened. He stood up suddenly and said, "Don't you worry. She won't be able to run away."

Chen Jingjing: "Do you have any confidence that you can find her?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "If I could find her the last time, I can find her again this time."

Although he said those words with his mouth, he did not have the least bit of confidence in his heart.

He simply wanted to comfort her -- if you have a special relationship with a woman, even if she makes a mistake, all you can do is to forgive her, and you would find a way to console her. If she let you down, all you

can do is to admit it. -- If you maintained some distance with a woman from the start, she would not feel anxious, but you would.

"Why do men always have this many complications?" Lu Xiaofeng groaned inwardly, "Why didn't I follow Honest Monk's example, just shave my head clean and forget about everything?"

"After she killed Tang Keqing, unavoidably she would feel a bit scared, thereupon she ran away."

"Mmm."

"At that time you were also at the Silver Hook Casino, didn't you see the direction she took?"

"I did not," Chen Jingjing replied, "When I heard Little Tang's miserable cry, I rushed downstairs, but she was already gone."

"No one else saw her?"

Chen Jingjing shook her head. "As soon as the sky turns dark, everybody in this place would stay inside, much less it was particularly cold tonight. It also happened to be dinner time."

Lu Xiaofeng was deep in thought. "But I know one person, who would still be strolling outside no matter how cold the weather is."

Chen Jingjing: "Who are you talking about?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "The Old Goat."

Chen Jingjing: "Is he the old freak who lives inside the giant water barrel?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. "Have you seen that giant water barrel?"

Chen Jingjing: "When I came a while ago, I saw a blazing fire on that direction, like a house is on fire."

Lu Xiaofeng frowned, "But there is no other building in that direction, and the water barrel is fireproof."

Chen Jingjing: "That's why I also did not know what's going on."

Lu Xiaofeng: "In that case we'd better go quickly to have a look."

It was very cold outside, the wind blowing on your body felt like it is penetrating your fur coat and piercing your bones.

Before they even saw the giant water barrel, they had already smelled strong aroma of wine carried by the wind.

Lu Xiaofeng's nose had already frozen stiff, but he was still able to smell the aroma. He frowned immediately. "Not good."

Chen Jingjing: "What's not good?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I don't care what kind of wine it is, but if it entered the belly, the aroma will not drift this far."

Chen Jingjing: "But if the wine is burned, won't the aroma drift very far?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded, "But the Old Goat I know will never burn wine, he usually pours the wine into his belly."

Chen Jingjing also frowned. "Do you think someone is using wine to burn his water barrel?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Although the water barrel cannot be burned, the person can be burned to death."

Chen Jingjing: "Who wants to burn him? Why would they want to burn him to death?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because he knew too many secrets."

If someone keeps too many secrets in his belly, he would be like dry firewood soaked with oil, very easy to burn.

Right now the fire was already out.

When they arrived at the giant water barrel, they saw black smoke rising from it. They also saw firewood was piled up high all around it, the firewood had also been scorched black.

The aroma of wine still lingered in the air. Such a high pile of firewood, soaked in wine, the blaze was certainly not small. Even seventy or eighty water buffaloes would definitely well roasted, let alone only an old mountain goat.

Chen Jingjing: "The aroma of wine has not dispersed yet, the fire must have died not too long ago."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I'll go in to take a look, you wait outside."

He leaped up, but suddenly jumped back down.

Chen Jingjing: "What's the matter?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I cannot go in."

Chen Jingjing: "Why?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because the inside is full of ice."

Chen Jingjing: "In this place, even boiling water will turn into ice immediately. Nobody would have a way to fill such a big barrel with water to the brim. How can there be any ice inside?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Heaven knows ..."

His sentence had not finished when suddenly there was a 'Pop!' A long strip of crack was formed on the barrel's wall. Followed by another 'Pop!' as the crack split open. In the blink of an eye, this specially manufactured giant water barrel disintegrated into pieces as large as a table, and one by one the pieces fell down and crashed to the ground.

But as the water barrel fell apart, the ice inside did not crumble. Under the dim starlight, it stood straight up like an iceberg. There seemed to be a painting inside the transparent ice.

Lu Xiaofeng: "I thought you have a flint with you?"

Chen Jingjing: "Uh huh."

She handed the flint over to him. He picked up a dried up branch and lighted it. When the fire brightened, their hearts sank. Chen Jingjing almost could not stand up.

Even Lu Xiaofeng had never seen this kind of strange and dreadful scene in all his life.

Under the glittering torch light, the transparent iceberg looked like a large chunk of jade-white crystal, sparkling brilliantly with fantastic beauty.

In the middle of this sparkling crystal, there were two humans hovering as if they were suspended vertically in the air, unmoving.

Two naked people. One with head on top, the other with feet on top. One was a shriveled and thin old man, which was the Old Goat, the other had a pair of large breasts and ample thighs, which was, to their surprise, Li Xia. Their four eyeballs were bulging out, one pair at the top, the other at the bottom, staring at Chen Jingjing and Lu Xiaofeng.

Finally Chen Jingjing cried out in fear and passed out. When she regained her consciousness, she was back at the Silver Hook Casino, back at her own bedroom.

The decoration in her room was both elegant and unique; each article seemed to be meticulously chosen and was placed at the most appropriate spot. There was a large and thick bearskin draped over the chair, as warm as the ocean wave under the summer sun.

Chen Jingjing had been awake for quite some time, but he seemed to be asleep and was not awake yet.

The fire in the stove was blazing hot, the lantern was also very bright. The scene she had just seen seemed to be a distant memory of her childhood dream.

Chen Jingjing sighed softly, with a bitter smile she muttered, "Luckily I passed out. If I had to look at those two people a bit longer, I might be scared to death."

Lu Xiaofeng did not answer, he did not even show any reaction.

Chen Jingjing stared at him and continued, "What are you thinking about? What is your concern?"

Finally Lu Xiaofeng said slowly, "There was no water in the water barrel, so it was impossible for it to be filled with ice. Since nobody had any way of filling the barrel with water, where did the ice come from?"

Chen Jingjing: "And now you have figured it out?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not reply directly, he asked again, "When I was there yesterday, there was a large accumulation of snow on the riverbank by the barrel. But today actually I did not see any. Where has that pile of snow gone?"

Chen Jingjing rolled her eyes. "It has gone inside the water barrel?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. "If you light up a fire outside the water barrel, won't the snow inside melt into water?"

Chen Jingjing's eyes glittered. "As soon as the fire outside was extinguished, the water would quickly turned into ice."

Lu Xiaofeng: "And just before the water froze, Li Xia and the Old Goat were thrown into barrel."

Chen Jingjing bit her lip. "After she killed Little Tang, she went to find the Old Goat, because they were old friends. Moreover ..."

Moreover, although the Old Goat was old, his body was still strong, while Li Xia was in a desperate need of a man.

Although she did not say these words, and she could not bear to say it, she knew that Lu Xiaofeng also understood this fact.

And sure enough, Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "Perhaps it was then that someone killed them."

Chen Jingjing: "But who killed them? And for what?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I cannot figure out who this killer is, but I know for certain that it was also because of the Luocha Tablet."

Chen Jingjing: "But the Luocha Tablet would not necessarily fall into his hand by killing Li Xia."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled ruefully, "And since he failed to acquire it, he won't let me have it either."

Chen Jingjing also sighed. "I still don't understand. After killing Li Xia, why would he spend so much effort in melting the snow into water and then freezing Li Xia in the ice?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Perhaps he only wanted to threaten Li Xia to hand the Luocha Tablet over to him before the water froze."

Chen Jingjing: "But Li Xia was not stupid; she certainly knew that even if

she hand over the Luocha Tablet to him, there would only be death to her, therefore ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Therefore, the Luocha Tablet must still be at its original hiding place."

Chen Jingjing sighed, "It's a pity that Li Xia is dead; nobody else knows this secret."

Lu Xiaofeng got up and stood in front of the stove. He seemed to be very deep in thought for a long time before slowly said, "I have a friend who told me that there are only two people I can trust in this place. One was the Old Goat, the other is you."

Chen Jingjing appeared to be very surprised. "Who is your friend? Does he know me?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "She is also your friend; not only that, she grew up with you."

Chen Jingjing's eyes grew big. "Are you talking about Ding Xiangyi?" she asked in shock, "How did you know her?"

With a forced smile Lu Xiaofeng said, "I only want you to know that she is a friend of mine. About other matter, you'd better not ask too many questions."

Chen Jingjing stared hard at him, finally she slowly nodded: "I understand. I also want you to know that her friend is my friend."

Lu Xiaofeng: "And thus you won't deceive me?"

Chen Jingjing: "I won't."

Lu Xiaofeng: "So if you knew where that Luocha Tablet is hidden, you'd certainly tell me."

Chen Jingjing: "But I really do not know."

Lu Xiaofeng heaved a deep sigh. "For that reason, actually Li Xia should not die. Moreover, she should not die such a tragic death. I always feel that only a lunatic would be able to invent that kind of method to kill people. But there is only a half-lunatic in this place."

Chen Jingjing: "Who?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Li Shentong."

Chen Jingjing was startled. "Do you think he is able to deal with his own sister with such a violent treachery?"

Before Lu Xiaofeng could answer, suddenly someone rushed in from outside the room, while clapping his hands and laughed, "At long last she agrees to marry me. Finally I have a wife. You must come quickly to drink my wedding wine."

Obviously, this man was Li Shentong.

He was still wearing the oversized red gown, with the green pointy hat on his head. Unexpectedly, his face was smeared with a layer of red rouge commonly used in wedding ceremony. He seemed to be crazier than before. But was he really crazy? Or was only pretending to be crazy?

Chen Jingjing could not bear not to ask him: "Who agrees to marry you?"

Li Shentong: "Naturally my new bride."

Chen Jingjing: "And where is your new bride?"

Li Shentong: "Naturally she is in our bridal chamber."

"Today in my bridal chamber, everybody is radiant with joy, the bride is truly pretty, I so love my bride ..." [Translator's note: this is supposed to be a song, but I can't make the English translation rhyme. My apologies.]

He insanely clapped his hands and sang loudly, and then dashed out the room.

Chen Jingjing could not help but asking Lu Xiaofeng: "Do you want to see his bride?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I do."

Obviously Li Shentong also had his own bedroom. Unexpectedly, he

also lighted a pair of red candles in his room, and there really was a bride on his bed, wearing a red skirt and a red veil over her face.

She sat on the bed, leaning against the headboard. Li Shentong stood by her side while incessantly singing a very annoying song.

Chen Jingjing frowned and said, "We are not here to hear you sing. Can't you shut your mouth up?"

Li Shentong kept giggling madly, "But my bride is very beautiful, don't you want to see her?"

Chen Jingjing: "I do."

Immediately Li Shentong reached out to lift the red veil, but suddenly he pulled his hand back, while muttering, "I must ask her first whether she wants to see you."

He really stooped down with his face close to his bride's ear, and then whispered some indistinct words.

The bride did not seem to open her mouth; as a matter of fact, she did not seem to react at all, but Li Shentong sprang up and laughed, "She agrees, she even wants you to toast her with a cup of wine."

Thereupon he reached out and this time he indeed lifted up the red veil covering the bride's face.

Lu Xiaofeng and Chen Jingjing's hearts sank again, and they felt their entire body go ice-cold stiff; they felt that this scene was even more nauseating compared to the two-dead-people-in-the-ice scene they had just witnessed earlier, it was even more shocking.

The bride's face was also smeared with thick red rouge, but her eyes were bulging out.

To their utmost shock, the bride was a dead woman.

"Little Tang," Chen Jingjing could not help but screaming in terror, "Tang Keqing."

But Li Shentong was still laughing happily, while preparing four cups of wine, and then, grinning and walking, he handed one cup over to Chen Jingjing: "One cup for you, one cup for me, one cup for him, and one cup for the bride."

Lu Xiaofeng and Chen Jingjing did not have any choice but to receive the cups, while in their hearts they were feeling very uncomfortable.

It seemed that this man was indeed insane.

Li Shentong had already walked toward the head of the bed. He sat down and gave the cup to his bride, while laughing and saying, "Let's drink this sweet wine together. After we drink it, I am going to kick them out of here."

Of course the bride did not lift her hand to receive the cup. He

glowered at her, "Why don't you want to drink the wine? Are you having a second thoughts and do not want to marry me anymore?"

Chen Jingjing really did not want to see it anymore, she was afraid she would cry, she was more afraid she would throw up. Finally she could not bear not to shout, "Can't you see she is already dead? Why do you still want to ..."

Li Shentong leaped up suddenly and hissed, "Who said she is dead? Who said it?"

Chen Jingjing: "I did."

Li Shentong glowered hatefully at her then sternly said, "Why did you say such words?"

Chen Jingjing: "Because she is really dead. If you truly love her, you should let her rest in peace."

Suddenly Li Shentong dashed toward her: "She is not dead. She is my new bride, she must not die."

Forcefully he grabbed Chen Jingjing's collar and tried as hard as he could to shake her. Chen Jingjing's face turned green from fear. Without thinking she gave him a heavy slap on his face.

The ringing of the slap, the sound of weeping, the sound of screaming, suddenly stopped. The room became as quiet as a tomb. Li Shentong stood with a blank expression on his face. From his dull looking eyes

suddenly appeared two drop of tears, which then slowly rolled down his rouge-covered face.

The tears mixed with the rouge, flowing down like two streams of blood.

His dull eyes were still fixed on Chen Jingjing; the emotion showing in his eyes was that of a deep sorrow, but also with a hint of madness.

Chen Jingjing could not restrain her urge to draw back, she only took two steps back and was not able to stop herself from shuddering.

Li Shentong slowly said, "That's right, she is dead. But I remember who killed her."

Chen Jingjing: "Who ... who was it?"

Li Shentong: "It was you, it's you! I saw it. You used a stocking to strangle her."

Suddenly he turned around and lifted Tang Keqing's collar to show a strip of purple scar on her neck. "Look, you did it, you cannot deny it even if you want to."

Chen Jingjing was anxious and angry at the same time that her body did not stop trembling. "You are crazy, you are really crazy. Luckily no one will believe your crazy talk."

Li Shentong ignored her, he suddenly fell on Tang Keqing's body and wept loudly, "Do you know why I followed my Jiejie? It was because I am secretly in love with you, all along I was waiting for you to agree to marry me. Although I am penniless, Blue Beard has already promised me thirty thousand taels of silver. Because of these thirty thousand taels of silver, I was willing to sacrifice even my own Jiejie. But you ... why must you die?"

Lu Xiaofeng slipped out quietly, if he had to stay any longer, he would probably turn into a madman himself.

A man indeed must not love a woman too much, if his love was too deep, usually he would end up in tragedy.

Why must there be so many tragedies in this life?

Outside, it was dark and cold. As Lu Xiaofeng walked out, he took a very deep breath. Suddenly he bent over and threw up, he was continuously throwing up.

The night had been very deep.

Lu Xiaofeng strolled along the street alone for more than an hour. One by one the bright lanterns went out, one by one the cold stars twinkled in the sky, little by little his low spirit sank even lower.

He did not know how far he had walked, he did not even know when he stopped, but when he raised his head, he discovered that he had stopped right in front of Leng Hong'er's drugstore.

Surprisingly the light was still visible behind the door. He stared blankly at the closed door for half a day while asking himself in his heart, "Did I really want to see her? If not, why did I coincidentally stop at her door?"

This question, even he was not able to answer.

In the deepest part of one's heart oftentimes there are some secrets hidden, secrets which even he did not know about, or perhaps it's not that he did not know, but rather he did not dare to dig them out.

"What the heck. I am already here."

He knocked on the door.

But nobody answered the door. He gently pushed, the door was unlocked. The room was bright, but there was nobody in sight.

Where was she?

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng felt an inexplicable bad feeling, he immediately stepped in. There was nobody at the front hall, there was nobody in the bedroom at the back, there was nobody in the kitchen.

The back door of the kitchen was also unlocked and blown by the wind, it was banging against the door frame.

Could it be that sleep had evaded Leng Hong'er again that she slipped out of this small door to watch that black bear pass by?

A cold night full of mystery, a frozen river full of mystery; a black bear that appeared and vanished suddenly.

The boundless darkness seemed to be filled with this kind of unpredictable mysteries and dreadfulness.

Lu Xiaofeng set out in large strides, walking against the wind. What else would he find tonight? Although he was incapable of predicting what would happen, he was determined to find Leng Hong'er. In no way would he let Leng Hong'er also disappear in this mysterious darkness.

But where was Leng Hong'er? Where was the black bear?

He had no idea whatsoever. Only, there were several cold stars in the distance, and he felt like walking toward those stars.

While looking at the twinkling stars, suddenly he heard a scream; the scream came from the direction of the stars, it was so sharp and miserable, obviously, it was a woman's voice.

He ran at full speed towards the voice. The stars were illuminating the frozen river, adorning the surface of the ice with silvery glitters, it looked impressive against the scarlet bloodstain on the river bank.

There were splotches of blood, blood drips, and blood streaks over the ice from the riverbank toward the river. Following these bloodstains for twenty, thirty more steps, he saw Leng Hong'er crouching motionless some distance away.

Her body was completely stiff like a block of ice, her entire face looked like a clump of meat dripping with blood, with five strips of deep scars that looked like the wound was caused by a claw. It was such a fatal wound that the power behind the claw must be immeasurable.

She must have seen that black bear she was talking about, but this time the black bear did not symbolize her deep desire, but rather a death wish to her.

The strange thing was, why did the hungry bear leave her body alone, and did not even touch her?

There was not a single tooth mark on her, evidently she was not dragged away by the black bear, but rather, she crawled on her own accord – why did she struggle with her last ounce of strength to crawl all the way to this place?

Although her body was twisted, both of her hands were stretched out forward, with her fingers clawing into the hard ice, as if she was trying to dig the ice – what secret could be hidden in the frozen river?

What was it that she was trying to dig?

At last the cold stars vanished one by one. The earth and the frozen river were enveloped in total darkness.

It was the darkest time of the night, but when Lu Xiaofeng raised his head, his eyes shone as if the bright light at the end of the tunnel was

already in sight.

Chapter 8 – Locust and Dragonfly Catch Cicada

The darkest time of the day is the time nearest dawn.

Life is just like that.

As long as you can survive the darkest and the most difficult times, your life henceforth will be brimming with bright prospects and hope. The first streak of light penetrated the darkness shone on Lu Xiaofeng's body.

The sunshine felt as warm and gentle as a lover's tender gaze; Chuchu and Chen Jingjing's tender gaze also felt warm and gentle on his body. Only their eyes also carried a bit of anxiety and confusion. They did not understand why Lu Xiaofeng dragged them here this early in the morning.

Under the morning light, the frozen river looked so glorious and spectacular. Leng Hong'er's body had been carried away, even the bloodstains had disappeared, but what they had seen would be very difficult to forget.

Chen Jingjing leaned on Lu Xiaofeng, her face was still pale. Only then she was finally able to open her mouth. "I have heard there are bears around here, but I have never thought they would be this vicious!" she said with a sigh.

Lu Xiaofeng: "So you think she died under the bear's claw?"

Chen Jingjing: "Only the most vicious beast would have such big strength, among the wild beasts, only bears can stand up like human and assault people with their front paws!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Make sense."

Chen Jingjing quietly said, "If you did not happen to wander around here, I am afraid not even her bones would have remained. Among the four of us, she was the only one I could talk to, I ..."

Her voice broke, her eyes reddened, and suddenly she buried her face on Lu Xiaofeng's shoulder and wept softly.

Lu Xiaofeng could not help but wrap his arm around her waist. When a man and a woman have had a special and intimate relation between them, it would be like dust under the bright sunlight, it would be difficult to hide from other people's eyes.

Chuchu stared at them then she laughed coldly and said, "I didn't come here to watch the two of you making out. Goodbye!"

And she left just like that. Only after she was quite some distance away did Lu Xiaofeng indifferently say, "So what do you want to see? Don't you want to see Luochoa Tablet?"

His words were like a lasso catching Chuchu's feet. "Luochoa Tablet? Have you found the Luochoa Tablet? Where is it?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Right here!"

By 'here' he meant the place where he found Leng Hong'er, that is, the place where Leng Hong'er was trying to dig the solid ice with her bare hands.

The ice was ten zhang thick, solid like a slab of steel. Not only she would not be able to dig with her bare hands, even if she had used iron spade and steel pick, she should forget the idea of moving only a fraction of the ice.

Chuchu: "Are you saying it is below the frozen river?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Not only that, it is exactly within a zhang circumference of this place."

Chuchu: "Can your eyes see through the ice? Can see what's inside the frozen river?"

That place was very near the river bank, the color of the ice was somewhat darker compared to other parts of the river; naturally nobody with normal vision would be able to see through the ice. There was only a section of a dead tree visible by the surface of the ice, presumably it fell down when the river started to freeze. Nobody knew who scraped the branches, but the short section of the tree trunk above the ice was like a bench; coincidentally, those who sit on this short trunk could see the snow covered mountain peak on the distance and a temple on the other side of the river.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Although I cannot see through the ice, I can feel it."

Chuchu sneered: "In any case, you cannot prove it. Even if the LuoCha Tablet was indeed inside the ice, you have no way of digging it out."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "When I was very young, I have heard two very useful sayings!"

Chuchu coldly said, "It's just too bad that no matter how useful those sayings are, they cannot move the frozen river!"

Ignoring her remark, Lu Xiaofeng continued, "The first one is: 'There is nothing impossible in this world for people with resolution.' The second one is: 'To do things right, you need the right tools.' I am sure you also know the meaning of these two sayings."

Chuchu: "I do not understand the least bit!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "In other words, if you have a strong will and the right tools, there is nothing in this world unachievable to you!"

Chuchu: "Too bad I cannot see your strong will, and I don't see you have any tools either!"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed again, "You'll see."

Chuchu stood on the side, watching.

Who would have thought that Lu Xiaofeng's tools were only about a

dozen bamboo tubes and one small bottle?

Chuchu laughed, "Is that all you have?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not seem to hear what she said, his face suddenly turned serious as he pulled the cork of the bottle and carefully poured the contents of the bottle one drop at a time. As a drop of dull yellow liquid dripped on the ice, there was a hissing noise, accompanied by a whiff of blue smoke. Surprisingly, it was as if the solid ice, as solid as steel, was drilled by the liquid that a hole appeared on the ice.

Before the smoke completely dissipated, he had already inserted the bamboo tube into the hole. With one hand pouring the liquid from the bottle and the other hand inserting the bamboo tubes, in a short moment the dozen or so bamboo tubes were all inserted into the ice, forming a circle of approximately one zhang in diameter.

Each bamboo tube had a fuse about two, three chi long. He lighted an incense stick, then like a flash his shadow moved as he lighted the dozen or so fuses together. Suddenly he shouted, "Back off! Hurry up and back off!"

The three of them leaped about five zhang back, and then a loud 'Boom!' was heard. The earth shook as millions of ice chips flew up, along with the debris from the dead tree, filling the air like rain falling down onto the surface of the river. They also heard another indeterminate noise, like a hollow metal being struck, or zither string being pulled, or like the sound of pearls falling onto a piece of jade, followed by a blackish object shot up from the explosion and 'Dang!', it fell down amidst the rain of ice and wood chips on the surface of the frozen river. Turned out it was a steel cylinder.

When the cap of this steel cylinder was ripped open, a piece of sparkling and translucent jade tablet slipped out. Sure enough, it was the Luocho Tablet.

Chuchu could only stare in disbelief. Chen Jingjing was also dumbstruck. They stood motionless as the ice chips rained on their bodies, as if they did not even feel the sting.

Lu Xiaofeng heaved a long and deep sigh as he smiled and said, "This is my tool. What do you think?"

Chuchu forced a smile and said, "This kind of weird method, I am afraid can only come from you."

Lu Xiaofeng: "If there was no gunpowder made by Pi Lei Tang [lit. Thunderbolt Hall] of Jiangnan, even a better method would be useless."

Chuchu: "Where did you get the Thunderbolt Hall of Jiangnan's gunpowder?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I stole it?"

Chuchu: "From where?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "From the water barrel."

Chuchu: "Whose water barrel?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Li Xia's."

After discovering Leng Hong'er's body, Lu Xiaofeng had a hunch that the LuoCha Tablet was hidden in that place, but he was not a hundred percent sure.

Lu Xiaofeng: "And then when I found these things inside Li Xia's water barrel, I knew I have guessed correctly. Because she had always handled matters prudently, in whatever she did, she must have prepared a good way out. If she dared to hide the LuoCha Tablet in the frozen river, she must have prepared a way to retrieve it. "

Since this kind of extremely strong solvent and extremely powerful gunpowder could break open a mountain, naturally it could also shatter the frozen river.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Since she had already prepared this kind of powerful tool, it is only natural to deduce that she had hidden the LuoCha Tablet inside the frozen river. This logic is as simple as 'one and one equal two'."

Actually, this logic was not simple at all; he arrived at the conclusion after going over countless hypotheses and numerous proofs.

Suddenly Chuchu sighed and said, "Actually, I was going to curse you some more, but I have to admit that in my heart I am a bit impressed by you!"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "Actually, in my heart I am also very impressed by

myself!"

Chuchu rolled her eyes: "But your ability cannot be considered great yet; if you can find the assailant who murdered Li Xia, then I can say that your ability is truly amazing."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "I do not wish other people to call me amazing, I also do not wish to find someone else's murderer, the one I want is only the Luochoa Tablet."

All this time Chen Jingjing was staring at him. She suddenly said, "And now since you have found what you are after, I presume you are going to leave soon?"

She said those words very softly, perhaps with a pang of hidden bitterness and heartache?

Lu Xiaofeng could not help but sighing. He slowly said, "Perhaps I should have left earlier."

With a rueful smile Chen Jingjing said, "No matter what, I can be considered the host in here. Today at noon, I am going to hold a farewell dinner for you, both of you must grace it with your presence."

Chuchu quickly said, "He will certainly come, but I won't."

Chen Jingjing: "Why?"

Chuchu: "Because your wine and dishes will definitely have a lot of vinegar in it. If I consume too much vinegar, I will have a stomachache!"

She also sighed, and then looked at Lu Xiaofeng with the corner of her eye. "Not only stomachache, I might have heartache as well. Therefore, I'd rather not go!"

As soon as he returned to the Eternal Heaven Restaurant, Lu Xiaofeng went straight to bed, and he did sleep very well.

However, he told himself: "At the most I can sleep only for four hours."

Sure enough, before the four hours were over, he had woken up.

His body seemed to have a built-in internal alarm clock, whatever time he set his clock, it would go off at the appointed time -- actually, everybody subconsciously has this kind of alarm clock, it's just that Lu Xiaofeng's alarm clock was particularly sharp.

When he opened his eyes, Chuchu was standing at the door, watching him. "I have been waiting for you for a long time!"

Lu Xiaofeng rubbed his eyes, "Why are you waiting for me?"

Chuchu: "I want to say goodbye to you!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Goodbye? You want to leave now?"

Chuchu drily said, "Since you have found the Luocha Tablet, I figure my debt is settled. You want to go drinking wine, I don't want to drink vinegar; why shouldn't I leave now?"

She did not give Lu Xiaofeng any chance to open his mouth, she asked, "I just want to know one thing, how did you suddenly become that close to her? Furthermore, you two seemed to have had sex!"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "The reason is very simple: because I am a normal man, and she is a normal woman!"

Chuchu: "What about me? Am I not a woman? Am I not normal?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You are a normal woman all right, too bad you are a little bit too normal!"

Chuchu fixed her gaze at him. Suddenly she lunged forward, lifted his blanket up, and pressed his body down with hers.

Lu Xiaofeng: "What are you doing?"

Chuchu: "I just want to tell you: as long as I am willing, whatever she can do, I can also do, moreover, I can do it better than she does!"

Her fiery hot torso did not stop twisting and swaying, caressing and rubbing his body, she nibbled on his ears and panted for breath. "I was ready for you, but you did not want me. And now aren't you starting to regret your decision?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. He could not but admit that this girl was a little demon who could raise a dead man.

Chuchu actually leaped up and dashed out the door without even turning her head. She shouted, "So then you'd better lie on your bed alone and regret slowly."

Lu Xiaofeng did not have to lie on his bed alone for too long, because Chuchu had just left when Chen Jingjing showed up with two small wine cups and a pot of wine. She chuckled and said, "Why did that Miss who loves to drink vinegar and afraid to have stomachache leave first?"

With a bitter smile Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Because if she did not leave first, my head would hurt more than her stomach."

Chen Jingjing sweetly said, "It is best that she is gone. I have already closed the Casino with the intention of spending time with you in here."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "It's a pity the wine you bring is only enough for me to rinse my mouth."

Chen Jingjing tenderly said, "The wine does not need to be plenty. As long as it is drunk with sincerity, one cup is already enough."

Lu Xiaofeng: "All right, you pour, I drink!"

Chen Jingjing slowly poured two cups of wine. She quietly said, "I toast

you one cup, to bid you farewell, to wish you have a pleasant journey. You may also toast me one cup, to bid me farewell, for henceforth we will go our separate ways!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You are also leaving?"

Chen Jingjing sighed, "The five of us came together to this place; now, I am the only one left, why would I want to stay here?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You ... do you know where you are going?"

Chen Jingjing: "I do. Somewhere."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Since we both are going to leave, why can't we travel together?"

Chen Jingjing smiled ruefully, "Because I know you are not being sincere in inviting me, I also know that the number of women by your side must be many. I have never known any woman who does not drink vinegar, I am also a woman, I ..."

She did not continue, but simply drained her cup, then slowly put the cup down, slowly turned around, and slowly walked away.

She did not turn her head, as if she was afraid that once she did, she would never have the ability to leave.

Lu Xiaofeng also did not stop her. He simply looked silently at her back.

Looking at his face, he looked like someone who had just drank a cup of bitter wine.

Right that moment, suddenly he heard someone on the outside say, "Congratulations! At last you succeed!"

The voice sounded old, naturally it came from Sui Han San You.

Lu Xiaofeng had already seen their hands before he even saw the people.

"Hand it over!" The old man Gu Song had not entered the room, his hand had been stretched out. "You hand the stuff over then you may go. The gratitude and grudges between us henceforth are written off."

Lu Xiaofeng did not open his mouth, he did not even move, he was just looking at them with a wide stupid grin on his face.

The old man Gu Song's face sank. "Don't you understand what I just said?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I understand."

The old man Gu Song: "Luocha Tablet?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "It's gone!"

The old man Gu Song's countenance changed abruptly. "What did you say?" he said in stern voice.

Lu Xiaofeng was still smiling, "What you said, I understood. How come you do not understand what I said?"

The old man Gu Song: "Are you saying you do not have the Luochoa Tablet?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I did have it."

The old man Gu Song: "And now?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "And now somebody has stolen it."

The old man Gu Song: "Who stole it?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "By the person who had just pressed me and rolled around on my body."

The old man Gu Song: "By the woman whom you brought in here?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Of course it was a woman, if it was a man pressing me and rolling around my body, I would have fainted early on!"

The old man Gu Song was furious. "You clearly knew she has stolen your Luochoa Tablet, and yet you let her go free?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I have to let her go free."

The old man Gu Song: "Why?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because the Luocha Tablet she has stolen is a fake one."

The frigid wind, dark clouds and murky sky, snow covered road, a solitary woman riding a thin and weak little donkey, with a faint cold and lonely sound of Qiang flute [vertical flute used by the Qiang – an ethnic group of Chinese people] coming from a distance, and a large temple looming silently like a dark cloud.

She was at the ends of the earth, but her heart was even farther, at the outer space [Translator's note: ends of the earth – 'tian ya', outer space – 'tian wai'].

"A lonely life, an endless journey, gazing into the infinite road toward the horizon, where is the way back home ...?"

She travelled very slowly. Since she did not know where the way back home was, why should she hasten on her journey?

Suddenly from the fork of the road a large horse-drawn carriage came over. The driver was a large man wearing a fur cap on his head, with a long whip in his hand. When the carriage caught up with her, the man unexpectedly smiled to her.

And she smiled back.

What harm would a little smile between two travelers while journeying together at the ends of the earth and meeting each other by chance be, although they were not acquainted with each other?

Suddenly the man driving the carriage asked, "Miss, are you or are you not cold?"

Chen Jingjing: "Cold."

The man driving the carriage: "You won't be cold if you sit inside the carriage!"

Chen Jingjing: "I know!"

The man driving the carriage: "Then why haven't you boarded the carriage?"

Chen Jingjing thought for a moment then slowly dismounted the donkey. The carriage had also stopped -- Since she dared to go down even a deep fryer, why not board a carriage?

Seeing she boarded the carriage, the driver suddenly lashed his whip at the donkey's behind.

Feeling the pain, the donkey fled like an arrow, leaving behind the desolate land.

A smile appeared at the corner of the driver's mouth. Leisurely he hummed a tune, a folk song: "In the Hei Wu La by the Song River there was a beautiful and tender girl; from among a million of rich families she chose me. I embraced her by the waist, not because of my family's riches, but because she is so tender!"

The song was melodious; it seemed to bring a joyous rhythm to the bland snow and ice covered road.

Afterwards, the carriage travelled far away.

This Hei Wu La was not the Hei Wu La by the Song River.

The Hei Wu La by the Song River was a town by the Song Hua River, a big river.

This Hei Wu La was not a big town, but on this extremely cold and desolate place in the middle of nowhere, it cannot be considered too small either.

More than two hours later, the large horse-drawn carriage had reached Hei Wu La. After going through two large streets, it turned into a small alley and stopped in front of a small hut.

The man driving the carriage turned his head around and smiled, "We have arrived at my house. Would Miss care to come in and sit down?"

It was not until half a day later that Chen Jingjing's unenthusiastic voice replied from inside the carriage, "Since I am already here, there is no harm for me to come in and sit down."

She had just got out of the carriage when the shabby wooden door opened with a creaking noise and a foolish looking and filthy boy stood at the threshold, looking at her with a grin and giggle on his face.

Chen Jingjing's face did not show any emotion. She patted the dust from her clothes, and then slowly walked in.

Inside the door was a very crude small living room, situated at the middle of the wall there was an offering table with an idol of the God of Wealth, holding a gold ingot in his hand. There was another leafed door toward the back, where a cotton cloth curtain was hung; it was faded blue in color from too much washing. There was a large red 'happiness' character made of paper pasted above the opening. Whoever entered this room would be able to see immediately that the owner of this place must be a poor peasant who dreamed about gaining sudden wealth all day long.

One poor peasant, one filthy kid, a broken down house with two, maybe three, unstable rooms, which felt like it was ready to fall down to the east and lean to the west anytime, four, maybe five, broken down and tattered wooden furniture, the 'happiness' character above the door, which, whoever sees it would not be able to say that it was pleasing to the eyes, and the idol of the God of Wealth on the wall, which looked more like a newly rich person.

Actually, it was the kind of place where Chen Jingjing would not stay even for a moment; she liked tidiness, she liked elegant furniture, but

unexpectedly, this time she did not look like she was about to leave soon.

Could it be that she had nowhere else to go?

The poor kid was still looking at her with smile on his face; her face still did not show any emotion. She looked around the room; unexpectedly she then raised the faded blue cotton curtain and entered other people's bedroom.

Naturally, there would be a bed in a bedroom. The bed was unexpectedly very big; moreover, it looked brand new. The mattress and the quilt also looked brand new, not only that, it was also exquisitely embroidered with expensive yarn in the shape of four big scarlet flowers and a pair of mandarin ducks playing on the water.

Behind the bed piled four, five brand new chests made of camphor-wood, and a dressing table with a water chestnut-shaped mirror. The wall all around was white-washed that the room felt like a snowy cave. Apparently, it was a newly-wed couple's bridal chamber.

Chen Jingjing frowned, her eyes revealed a disgusted look; but when her gaze fell on those camphor-wood chests, her eyes immediately shone.

And then she did the most unthinkable thing: she jumped into somebody else's bed, and then she took a string of keys from her bosom and opened up the large padlock on somebody else's camphor-wood chest.

Suddenly, a dazzling golden ray burst out from the camphor-wood

chest, for surprisingly, the chest was full of ingots of pure gold [orig. 'yuan bao' – gold ingots in the shape of boat].

The golden ray also shone on her face, the face that revealed a smile for the very first time. She ran the tip of her finger gently on the row after row of neatly stacked golden ingots, just like a mother gently caressed her newborn baby.

To gain this gold was not an easy matter at all, it was a lot more difficult than for a mother giving birth to a child.

But right now all hardship and misery had passed, so she sighed with contentment. When she looked up, she saw the man driving the carriage has just entered the room. He smiled and said, "What do you think of my play acting?"

Chen Jingjing smiled sweetly, "Good, it was very good, truly deserving the title 'Number One Child Prodigy in the World'."

The man driving the carriage exploded in laughter. He took off the fur cap, which was pressing low to his eyebrows, to reveal a somewhat boyish face. He was none other than Li Shentong.

After taking out the red gown and the green hat he wore earlier to feign insanity, this man did not look the least bit crazy on the contrary, he did not look ugly at all.

Chen Jingjing looked at him with her eyes brimming with tender and happy feelings, "These last two days must be very hard on you."

Li Shentong laughed, "It was not that hard, it was just a bit nerve-wrecking; that four-eyebrowed son of a b**tch truly was not a tasty and well-cooked rice!"

Suddenly he also asked, "When you left, did he ask you about me?"

Chen Jingjing shook her head, "He thinks you are really crazy, so basically he does not even think about you!"

Li Shentong laughed, "That's why although that guy is like a ghost, he still drank the water you used to wash your feet in."

Chen Jingjing: "Wasn't it entirely because of you? When you pretended to be crazy, even I almost believed it!"

Li Shentong: "That's not difficult at all; I only had to pretend that Hong'er was you. You should have known that I directed those words to you."

He looked at her as if he was entranced by her, just like a baby desiring to drink his mother's milk. After a long time, he laughed and said, "What do you think of the way I decorated this room?"

Chen Jingjing sweetly said, "Very good, it simply looks like a bridal chamber!"

She lied down with a smile on her face; lied down with that pair of eyes

that can melt ice into water looking at Li Shentong. "Do you think I look like a bride?" she asked in husky voice.

Li Shentong's adam's apple went up and down; he looked too nervous to even breathe. Suddenly he pounced to the bed and pressed her down. With a gasping breath he said, "I want you, I have been holding myself crazy ... It has been three months since we ..."

While his mouth was busy talking, his hands were also busy pulling her clothes.

Chen Jingjing did not push him away at all, she was also panting slightly, her hot breath was blowing onto Li Shentong's ear that he felt the bones in his entire body had turned into jelly. She also wrapped her arms around his neck.

Li Shentong gasped even harder that his voice turned raspy, "I can't take it anymore, hurry up ..."

Suddenly there was a 'Crack!' noise, just like the sound of breaking bones. He leaped high into the air from Chen Jingjing's body but his head hang limply on his shoulders. His entire body crumpled like a lump of mud as 'Crash!' he fell back onto the floor. His eyes bulged out, his breathing stopped.

Chen Jingjing did not even give him another look, she quietly lied down on the bed and shut her eyes.

Right this moment, from outside came a tender laugh, as clear as the

sound of a silver bell. Obviously it was a melodious laughter of a woman. She clapped and laughed: "Good, very good! No wonder ever since we were little, Little Ding has always said that you are the most ruthless-hearted woman; she really has not misread you!"

Chen Jingjing's countenance changed suddenly, but by the time she stood up, her face had already wore that kind of gentle and touching smile, "My heart might be ruthless, but it is still not too black. What about you?"

"My heart has been eaten by the wild dog a long time ago!"

A young woman wearing a fur cap and a five-flower pattern dress, walked in with a smile on her face. Her smiling countenance was as beautiful as the fresh blooming flowers in the late spring; she was none other than that really cute and moving Chuchu.

Behind her followed three men: one man dressed in black wielding a sword, one man looked nimble and strong like an ape, one man was old with long white hair; they followed her closely as if they were her shadow.

Chen Jingjing had already walked toward her to welcome her, she said sweetly, "I really did not expect you might come over here, otherwise, I would have prepared a few dishes of your favorite delicacies to accompany you drinking a couple of cups of your favorite Rose Nectar Wine!"

Chuchu smiled even sweeter, "I did not expect you would still remember my favorite dishes?"

Chen Jingjing: "After all, we grew up together. Even if you have forgotten me, I would definitely still remember you."

Chuchu: "Really?"

Chen Jingjing: "Of course. These past couple of days I had always wanted to look for an opportunity to visit you, but I was afraid it might raise someone else's suspicions."

Chuchu: "Same with me, that lowly four-eyebrowed sex maniac is truly not a good thing."

The two women were smiling to each other, their smiles were brimming with warm friendship.

With a tender voice Chen Jingjing said, "You haven't change a bit!"

Chuchu: "Neither have you."

Chen Jingjing: "I have missed you so much these past few years."

Chuchu: "I have missed you even more."

Both women were walking toward each other with arms open wide, as if they wanted to hug the other to express their love. But before they reached each other, Chen Jingjing's smile suddenly disappeared, her tender gaze became a fierce stare filled with a murderous look; her hands also changed, from open palms into eagle claws. Like a lightning one

claw struck toward Chuchu's main artery, while the other claw maliciously grabbed Chuchu's abdomen below her left ribs.

It was a very sharp and vicious attack, and was executed exactly in the same way as Leng Hong'er's 'spraining the muscle dislocating the bones' technique. If Chuchu was grabbed by her, Chuchu would not be able to die easily even if she wanted to.

But although her action was fast, Chuchu was even faster; she had just made a move when a light 'Ding!' was heard, two thin dark rays, as thin as a cow's hair, shot out from both of Chuchu's long sleeves.

She only felt tingling sensation on both knees, just like as if she was bitten by a mosquito; her strength immediately drained out and her legs gave up. 'Plop!' she fell on her knees, she knelt right in front of Chuchu.

Chuchu laughed again, with laughter as clear as the silver bell, "We have been sisters for many years, why be overly courteous?"

Amidst the melodious laughter, another cold ray flashed, striking Chen Jingjing's laughter acupoint on her waist.

Chen Jingjing started to laugh, she could not stop giggling, but there was not the least bit of laughter in her eyes. Her pretty face contorted in pain, with beads of cold sweat the size of soy beans rolled down her face.

Chuchu winked and laughed. "I get it. You must have been pricked by your own conscience that you have wronged me, and so you come to me to apologize. But why must you kneel down? As long as you hand that

thing over to me, I won't blame you anymore!"

Chen Jingjing was still laughing hysterically while the cold sweats were still flowing profusely; she struggled to say, "What thing?"

Chuchu: "You don't know?"

Chen Jingjing shook her head; her whole body was weakened from the laughter that this shake of the head seemed to entail a very strenuous effort on her part.

Chuchu's countenance fell; she coldly said, "Even among brothers all accounts must be settled clearly. We, sisters, are no different. Jia Leshan was willing to spend four hundred thousand taels of gold for Li Xia's Luochoa Tablet. You have promised me that as long as I can come up with a hundred thousand taels of gold, you would guarantee that the Luochoa Tablet would be mine, right?"

Chen Jingjing: "But ... hasn't the Luochoa Tablet already been taken by the man you brought along?"

Chuchu took out a piece of jade tablet. "Are you talking about this?"

Chen Jingjing nodded.

Chuchu suddenly walked over and slapped her with the back of her palm, while with a cold laugh said, "Do you really believe I can't see a fake article?"

Suddenly she forcefully flung the jade tablet toward Li Shentong's head and said, "You regarded this fellow as a clown, you think that his counterfeit goods may fool others, it's just too bad that his engraving of all those demons and deities are worse than Zhu Bajie [the pig-like character in Journey to the West]!"

Chen Jingjing struggled hard to bite her own lip, trying to stop her laughter, but even after her lip was torn her laughter did not stop.

Chuchu: "Actually, I have suspected you for a long time. You are obviously aware that the Luocha Tablet is a priceless treasure, yet you were willing to sell it to others? Usually your heart is blacker than anybody; when you eat someone, you won't even spit the bones out. That's why I ordered Xin Lao'er to observe you closely. Even if you hide underground, I will have a way to drag you out!"

Chen Jingjing: "You ... you think I took away the real Luocha Tablet?"

Chuchu: "Before Li Xia hid the Luocha Tablet in the frozen river, apparently you have already swapped it with the fake one. Although we originally ..."

Originally, their plan was ...

The amount of gold as the payment: if Chuchu would pay a quarter of the selling price, as long as three out of twelve chests were filled with gold, the other nine could be filled with rocks.

Because Chen Jingjing would personally receive the payment, as soon as the twelve chests were submitted, she would immediately notify Li Xia to deliver the goods.

She was Li Xia's most trusted aide, naturally Li Xia would not suspect any foul play. Li Xia was prepared to use the explosive to blast open the ice on the following day to get the Luocha Tablet out. All she wanted was just gold and men, she did not have the slightest interest toward the throne of the Cult Leader of the Western Region's Demon Cult.

Chuchu: "But you knew that as soon as she discovered the Luocha Tablet was fake, she would realize you had a part in it, because other than you and herself, there was no third person who knew about this secret. Therefore, that very evening you had to kill her, and then deliberately froze her, along with the Old Goat, inside the ice to divert other people's attention, because nobody would have guessed a woman like you would be able to commit such madness!"

She immediately continued, "You see, your secret is totally open before me, why would you still feign innocence?"

Chen Jingjing's entire body was twisting in convulsions; not only she was wet from cold sweat and tears, but even her pants were also completely soaked. Her knees felt like they had just been cut by steel blade, with the sharp edge of the blade lingering on the incisions; but she was still laughing continuously as if she had just picked up three hundred gold ingots from the street.

Chuchu: "You still don't want to get it out? Do you know what the outcome would be if you keep laughing like this?"

Chen Jingjing struggled with all her strength to close her mouth, but even her jaw refused to follow her command.

Chuchu: "When you first laugh, only sweat and tears came out; now, presumably your urine and feces are already out. Two or four hours later, the joints in your entire body would disintegrate, you will crumple on the ground like spilt mud. I don't care who, but if anybody would just touch you with the tip of his finger, I guarantee that you would scream like a pig being slaughtered!"

Chen Jingjing: "You ... you ..."

Chuchu: "If you think I do not have the heart to do this kind of ruthless act, you are wrong! Just like Jia Leshan did not believe I could kill him!"

Chen Jingjing: "You killed him?"

Chuchu: "He had money, he had power. Although he was no longer young, his stamina was excellent; he was still able to rock the bed, not the least inferior to any young man. His charm against women was several folds better than a young man. He was even more gentle and considerate toward me. Nobody would believe that I was capable of killing him!"

She continued drily, "Yet I have killed him. Since I can kill him, what other things I won't be able to do?"

Exhausting her entire strength, Chen Jingjing croaked, "The Luo cha

Tablet is in my sanitary cloth, please spare me!"

The sound of laughter had stopped, Chen Jingjing was paralyzed, she sprawled on the floor like a lump of mud.

Naturally the Luocha Tablet was already in Chuchu's hand. She held this piece of sparkling and translucent jade on the palm of her hands, just like a royalty holding the jade seal, the symbol of his authority. She was delighted, proud and also feeling smug, and could not restrain from shouting and laughing loudly.

Just when her laughter reached the happiest moment, suddenly a long whip flew in quietly from outside the window. The tip of the whip coiled itself around the jade tablet on her hand and just as quick, like a snake it flew back out the window.

Chuchu could not laugh anymore, the expression on her face was like someone whose nose had just been cut by somebody else.

She heard someone outside say with a laugh, "No need to chase me out, because I am coming in. I appreciate your help in getting this Luocha Tablet back for me, the least I can do is express my gratitude personally!"

Lu Xiaofeng!

Chuchu bit her lip: "I knew it must be you. Why don't you come in?"

She had just stopped talking when with a chuckle Lu Xiaofeng suddenly appeared in front of her, with a long whip in one hand and the jade tablet

in the other.

Seeing Lu Xiaofeng, she unexpectedly also laughed, "I didn't know you still have a hidden skill in whip technique!"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled, "I stole it!"

Chuchu: "Stole it? Stole what?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I stole this whip from the horse-drawn carriage outside, I stole the whip technique from the Shadowless Divine Whip ['wu ying shen bian']. Speaking about stealing, although my skill is a far cry from the King of Thieves, I might say that it is a lot higher than yours."

Chuchu sighed, "But I already knew about your stealing skill. You almost stole my heart away, much less other things?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "Didn't you say your heart had already been eaten by some stray dogs?"

With eyes wide open Chuchu said, "You came here pretty quick, actually!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You have never guessed?"

Chuchu: "How did you find it out?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed: "Because when I lay on my bed alone, I had so many things to think about, that's why I was able to solve a lot of mysteries."

Chuchu pouted: "Who told you to let your imagination runs wild alone? Why didn't you rape me?"

She seemed to be resentful that other people did not rape her. "You are not even a gentleman. If you could rape others, why couldn't you rape me?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "Because at that time I was not desperate yet. Since you withheld my desire, I also want to withhold yours!"

Chuchu blinked her eyes several times. "Since when did you change your mind?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Since the rocks spilled out from the chest."

He chuckled, and continued, "Although I am not accustomed to 'going on the line to open and dig out, stepping on the tray', but whether a chest is made of iron? Or is it gold? I think I can still clearly tell!"

'Going on the line to open and dig out' means stopping someone on the road and robbing him. 'Stepping on the tray' means looking at the appearance of the goods, looking at the wind and the water. It was said that the experts of the underground world, just by looking at the rising dust when a carriage passed by, would be able to tell what kind of cargo that carriage was hauling, plus the amount of the goods.

Chuchu sighed again: "Turns out not only you can steal, you also have this kind of ability. Actually it is too bad that a man like you does not become a robber."

Lu Xiaofeng also sighed in exasperation: "Frankly speaking, sometimes I also feel displeased with myself. Several times I almost change profession!"

Chuchu sweetly said, "If you did change your profession, definitely I would have been your chief's wife who's keeping the stronghold under control."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "If I became the chief of any gang, I would definitely ask you to become the Hall Leader of one of the three Internal Halls, just like your old friend, Ding Xiangyi!"

Chuchu's eyes grew big: "You knew I know her?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because as soon as we arrived at Rahasu, it was like you were home, you are very familiar with everything and everybody. At that time I already had my suspicions; it was very possible that you also grew up here, it was very possible that you already knew Chen Jingjing and Ding Xiangyi."

Chuchu stared hard at him. "Since you know Little Ding, you must be very close to her. I know her very well, seeing a man like you, it is impossible for her to let you off!"

Lu Xiaofeng neither denied nor admitted.

Chuchu pouted again. "Among the three of us, you have slept with two. Why did you neglect me?"

The two of them were talking and joking, flirting with each other; while the faces of the three men behind her had already changed. Suddenly they leaped out to surround Lu Xiaofeng with glowering looks.

Lu Xiaofeng acted as if he had just noticed them. He smiled, "Last time gentlemen withdrew without any fight; this time you all want to try again?"

The white-haired old man coldly said, "Last time we should have killed you!"

Xin Lao'er: "Last time we spared you because she still wanted to use you as her puppet!"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed aloud, "If I am her puppet, then what are you? I need only to nod, and she will come with me, but you?"

The three men's countenance grew even more terrifying, they turned their heads toward Chuchu, but Chuchu stepped aside, as if saying that this matter had nothing to do with her.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Actually, I have recognized Huashan disciple 'Solitary Finger Penetrates the Heaven', Hua Shaokun, the Wulin master of Jiangbei [in Sichuan province] 'Multi-hand Wolf Immortal', Hu Xin, and Cloaked

Sword School's 'Divine Sword in Black', Du Bai, long ago; but I did not dare to announce it to the world, because I did not believe three famous experts of such famous schools would be willing to be a woman's slaves."

The three men's countenance turned from green to white. They had assumed their given names as surnames, but Lu Xiaofeng was still able to recognize their real identity and origin.

The hunched body of the white-haired old man slowly straightened up. He cupped his fists and said, "That's right. I am Hua Shaokun. Please!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You want to fight me alone?"

Hua Shaokun: "If you did not know my real identity, I would definitely join hands with them and battle you together, but now ..."

Suddenly his expression became very solemn as he sternly said, "My own life and death, honor and disgrace, is not worth mentioning; but Huashan Pai's reputation must not be destroyed in my hands!"

Although Huashan was not the top or even the second rank Sect of the Wulin world, they were after all, a noble and respectable school. It was very rare that their disciples turned into a scum of the community, it was even rarer that their disciples turned into a coward!

Lu Xiaofeng's expression also turned solemn – one who can respect oneself is also worthy of other people's respect.

Hua Shaokun: "I have long heard Lu Daxia's [great hero] special finger

skill is number one in the world; coincidentally, Zaixia [humble one, lit. under/below] also trained this kind of skill. I beg Lu Daxia to grant me some pointers!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Very well!"

He took a very deep breath, put the Luocha Tablet securely in his pocket, and lay down the long whip. Suddenly there was a whooshing noise of a sharp gust of wind. Hua Shaokun's finger, as sharp as a sword, swiftly piercing the 'jian jing' [shoulder well] acupoint on Lu Xiaofeng's shoulders.

In this one move he had attacked two places, all along his power did not diminish at all, the second attack was as powerful as the first; he was truly worthy to be called a famous school's disciple.

But in this one move, although Lu Xiaofeng had to admit that this old man's skill was profound, his style actually lacked variation; his movement seemed to be too old-fashioned and somewhat stiff, which was exactly the shortcoming the famous schools' disciples usually have.

Although he only looked once, Lu Xiaofeng was confident that in two, three stances he would score a victory.

Yet he could not help but ask himself in his heart -- Once I make my move, should I defeat him? Should I give him a little more face? -- If one was in love, regardless of whom he loved, he should not be blamed, should he? Especially when he is already old; once he fell down, it would not be easy for him to stand back up.

While these thoughts flashed in his mind, Hua Shaokun's fingertip was already less than half a chi from his acupoint. He could feel the strong wind penetrating his clothes; he did not have the luxury of pondering his options away.

His only option was to make a move, make a move like a lightning, using his own fingertip to meet the old man's fingertip.

Hua Shaokun felt a burst of heat from his fingertip spreading into his entire body, while his own force suddenly faded away.

Huashan's Dan Zhi Shen Tong [divine flicking finger] was one among the seven major unique skills of the Wulin world, and his mastery of this skill was over forty years of hard training. But right now his strength vanished just like snow and ice melting under the bright sunlight and he was overcome by cold sweats all over his body.

Who would have thought that Lu Xiaofeng suddenly fell back two steps and said with a bitter smile, "Huashan's divine finger truly deserves its reputation."

Hua Shaokun: "But I ... I lost!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You did not lose. Although I took your attack, and perhaps my movement was somewhat quicker than yours, your power is actually deeper than mine, why do you bother ..."

He had not finished speaking when suddenly 'Ding!' dozens ray of cold stars like rain of flowers filling the sky threatened his back.

His back did not have eyes, also it did not have any hands.

Hua Shaokun's countenance changed from shock, but Chuchu's eyes actually shone.

In this split second, Lu Xiaofeng's body suddenly swiveled on his feet, dozens of cold stars flew very close below his ribs and since Hua Shaokun was standing in front of him, unexpectedly all of the stars landed on Hua Shaokun's chest.

Hua Shaokun's eyes bulged out, staring at Hu Xin while step by step he walked over to him.

Hu Xin's countenance also changed, as step by step he withdrew backward.

Hua Shaokun only managed to take two steps forward, when suddenly blood simultaneously gushing out from the corners of his eyes, his nostrils, and the corners of his mouth.

Hu Xin seemed to feel relieved, "I ..."

He only said one word when blood suddenly gushed out from the pit of his stomach; along with the blood, the tip of a sword appeared.

With eyes full of shock Hu Xin looked at the tip of the sword protruding out from his chest, as if he could not believe it was really happening.

Blood also gushed out from between his lips and then with a loud roar he fell forward, no longer moving.

It was not until after he collapsed that everybody could see Du Bai standing behind him with a sword held tight in his hand; blood was still dripping from the tip of his sword.

Looking at him, Hua Shaokun struggled hard to smile: "Thank you."

Du Bai also forced a smile, but did not say anything.

Hua Shaokun turned toward Lu Xiaofeng, word by word he said, "Thank you even more!"

Du Bai avenged him, Lu Xiaofeng preserved his reputation. These were exactly the two most cherished beliefs in the Wulin world.

Hua Shaokun closed his eyes. The corners of his mouth seemed to show a smile; his last smile.

The wind blew in through the window, the nip in the air felt as if it was creeping into the bottom of their hearts.

After a long time, Lu Xiaofeng finally heaved a sigh while muttered softly, "Why? What are all these for ...?"

Du Bai's face was expressionless. He slowly said, "You should know what are all these for. I also know!"

Greed!

Greed over money, greed over power, greed over fame, and greed over sex!

Isn't it a fact that all misery and disaster humankind are going through are all because of this greed?

Lu Xiaofeng could not help but heave a deep sigh again. He turned toward Du Bai and said, "You ..."

Du Bai coldly said, "I am not your match!"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, a very hollow laugh. "In that case, you may leave," he said, waving his hand.

The blood at the tip of the sword was dry. Du Bai slowly withdrew his sword. As the sword entered its sheathe, he was already standing in front of Chuchu. "Let's go!" he said.

Chuchu: "Go? You want me to come with you?"

Du Bai: "Yes, I want you to come with me!"

Suddenly Chuchu laughed, she doubled over in laughter, she laughed so hard that tears seemed to flow from her eyes.

Seeing Chen Jingjing laugh, Lu Xiaofeng only then knew that laughing is sometimes more painful than crying. Seeing Chuchu laugh, Lu Xiaofeng only then knew that sometimes laughter can hurt people more than the sharp blade of a sword.

It was as if blood was completely drained from Du Bai's face. His pair of originally very calm and steady hands trembled continuously. Yet he was unwilling to give up his hope; he asked again, "You don't want to go?"

Chuchu's laughter stopped abruptly. With cold eyes she looked at him, as if she did not recognize this man at all. After a long time she finally said with a frosty voice, "Get lost!"

These words were like a strip of merciless whip; a whip which cut through Du Bai's skin and bones, split him in halves, and ripped his heart away, and tossed it in front of him, letting him trample it with his own feet.

Without saying anything he turned around to leave. But Chuchu suddenly leaped, pulled the sword hanging on his back, flew high and made a somersault, while throwing the sword backhandedly toward the middle of his back.

Du Bai did not evade, he let this sword penetrate his heart.

But he did not collapse; instead, he turned around to face Chuchu, and looked at her coldly.

Chuchu's countenance also changed; forcing a laugh she said, "I know you cannot live without me, so I might as well let you die and that's the end of it."

Blood also gushed out of the corner of Du Bai's mouth; he slowly nodded his head, "Good, very good ..."

As the second 'good' came out of his mouth, suddenly he lunged forward and embraced Chuchu tightly, so tight that even in his death he did not let go.

The sword in his chest also pierced Chuchu's chest. The blood from his chest also flowed into Chuchu's chest.

Chuchu's head hang on his shoulder, her eyes gradually bulged out, while her breathing was growing harder. She felt the body embracing her own was growing colder; growing colder and stiffer, but the arms still did not relax.

Then her own body also started to feel cold, so cold that it penetrated her bones and marrows, but her eyes actually shone brighter. Suddenly she turned toward Lu Xiaofeng and laughed, "Why didn't you rape me? Why ...?"

And those were the last words she ever said.

Chapter 9 – The Panic-Stricken Powerful Enemy

Chen Jingjing did not die. Not only she did not die, her mind was very clear.

Under these circumstances, clear-headed in itself was a pain that was truly hard to endure; it was as if in the dark, there truly was a divine being who administer justice for the common people, who was deliberately tormenting her.

By this time Lu Xiaofeng had already carried her to the other room and lay her down quietly on the bed, but her pain had not diminished, perhaps only death would be able to free her from this suffering.

When the pain became intolerable, death suddenly became not in the least terrifying.

She wished to die. She really wished she could die, she only wished Lu Xiaofeng would give her a quick relief, but she would never make her desire known; because when she was very young, she received a very valuable lesson: The more you want to die, the more others would let you live, the more you want to live, the more others would want to kill you.

She also remembered that lesson today, because she had seen too many people who did not want to die died in front of her; she had also seen too many people who should not have lived, but clearly they were alive. After all, she grew up in a hard life.

Although Lu Xiaofeng was standing quietly by the bed, she could see

clearly that his mind was not peaceful at all. Whoever had seen an extremely disturbing, tragic and shocking incidence like that, definitely would not feel good in his heart.

Suddenly Chen Jingjing forced herself to laugh. "I did not expect you would come, but I am sure you have already found out it was me all along."

Lu Xiaofeng did not deny.

Chen Jingjing: "I always thought that I have prepared everything meticulously. If Chuchu was more careful and not letting the rocks inside the chest spilled out, perhaps you would not suspect me.

Lu Xiaofeng was silent for a long time. Finally he slowly said, "That the chest contained rocks yet you accepted it; that Chuchu and you had known each other since childhood, yet the two of you pretended not to know each other, although those two facts indeed made me very suspicious, they were not the most important clue at all!"

Chen Jingjing: "What was the most important clue?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "The black bear!"

Chen Jingjing: "The black bear?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Leng Hong'er thought she saw a black bear, while in fact it was nothing more than someone wearing black bearskin. Because this person was doing something very secretive, while her appearance was

very easy to be recognized by others, she wore the bearskin to deceive other people's eyes and ears. Whoever saw a black bear would certainly run away from it, he would not dare to come closer to look carefully."

Chen Jingjing: "And you think that person was me?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Mmm."

Chen Jingjing: "Because you saw a bearskin in my room."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Naturally you did not expect I would enter your room; it was simply a lucky coincidence!"

Chen Jingjing sighed, "Indeed nobody else has ever entered into my room; on this point you are not wrong at all."

Chen Jingjing continued, "You can go into my room, not because fortunately I was fainting; because that day I did not faint at all!"

Although her voice was weak, but each word was very clear, owing to the fact that she had always exercised a very good control on herself. Perhaps very few people in the world could be compared to her in term of self-control.

She added, "I let you go into my room, because when you carried me, suddenly I had a feeling I have never experienced before, I ... I also did not think that Li Shentong would suddenly break into my room."

Lu Xiaofeng also forced a laugh. "If I were him, I would also break into your room suddenly!"

Chen Jingjing: "Originally, there were two identical bearskins; the other one belonged to Li Xia!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "When the two of you buried the Luocha Tablet that night, were you both wearing the bearskins?"

Chen Jingjing: "It was very late at night, we did not expect Hong'er would still be sitting on the shore, busy with her thoughts. When I saw her, I do not doubt that she also saw me!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "But she did not see clearly, she thought you were a real black bear!"

With a bitter smile Chen Jingjing said, "Yet I was very worried; women are usually overly suspicious!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Therefore, when you found out that she was there last night, you killed her to shut her mouth."

Surprisingly, Chen Jingjing did not deny at all. "Ding Xiangyi always said I am the most ruthless person alive!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Although she did not know your secret, when you made your move to kill her, she finally recognized you."

Chen Jingjing sighed: "I am afraid I won't be able to forget her look when she saw my face for as long as I live!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "That time you were unavoidably a bit afraid, hence you left as soon as you strike went well."

Chen Jingjing: "Because I was confident her death was imminent."

Lu Xiaofeng: "But you did not think that when someone is at the death's door, oftentimes it is also the time when his mind was the clearest."

Chen Jingjing did not reply, her heart felt sour, because she realized her mind was very clear.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Therefore, before her death, she finally realized that the black bear must be you. She also realized that you must be burying the Luochoa Tablet. That's why she exhausted her last ounce of strength to crawl toward the place you appeared that night."

Chen Jingjing: "And thus you knew the place where we hid the Luochoa Tablet."

Lu Xiaofeng: "That's right!"

Chen Jingjing suddenly sneered, "That being the case, her death was advantageous to you; why are you grieved?"

Lu Xiaofeng wanted to say something, but in the end he kept silent.

Chen Jingjing: "You are grieving over matters that you should not grieve, but you are very happy over matters that you should be grieving."

Lu Xiaofeng stayed silent, waiting for her to continue.

Chen Jingjing: "When I looked for you that day, it was not because I wanted to deliver food and wine to you, or even because I care about you or because I like you. I looked for you, only because I had to hold you back, to give Li Shentong the time so that he could freeze Li Xia's body in the ice, that's why I steeled myself to endure your humiliation, while actually each time you touch me, I wanted to throw up!"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed suddenly. "I understand now!"

Chen Jingjing: "Understand what?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You want to die."

Chen Jingjing: "Why do you think I want to die?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because you deliberately want to infuriate me, you want me to kill you."

With a cold laugh Chen Jingjing said, "I know you won't dare, you can only watch other people in action, but you simply have never had the nerve to kill anybody!"

Lu Xiaofeng only laughed. Suddenly he turned around and walked away.

Chen Jingjing called out loudly, "Where are you going?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "To prepare the carriage!"

Chen Jingjing: "Why do you want to prepare the carriage now?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because you cannot ride a horse, and you cannot walk!"

Chen Jingjing: "You ... you want to take me away?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Although I cannot take the secret projectile buried inside your acupoint, I know someone who can do it."

Chen Jingjing: "You ... you ... why don't you just let me die?"

Lu Xiaofeng matter-of-factly said, "Because the number of people who has died today is simply too many."

He left without even looking back.

Looking at his back as he left, tears started to flow down from Chen Jingjing's eyes, until finally she wept bitterly. But nobody knows whether it was tears of sorrow? Or was it tears of remorse? Or was it tears of gratitude?

Whatever it was, if anybody wanted to cry, it would be best if he was left alone to weep freely, as much as he wanted.

Naturally Lu Xiaofeng heard her cry. He did wish that she could cry, that she could cry out the sorrow, pain and remorse filling her heart. Perhaps after crying she would not wish to die anymore.

The sun had already disappeared, the wind blew colder. The foolish-looking and filthy kid was still standing there with snooty nose, grinning foolishly at him. It looked like the tragic incident just a moment ago did not affect him in the least.

"Other people might laugh at his foolishness, but perhaps his life is somewhat happier than most people would ever live."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed inwardly. He smiled and patted the kid on his head, while saying, "Take a good care of that Auntie inside for me. She has a lot of money, she may buy you some candy!" Unexpectedly the foolish-looking kid understood what he said, jumping for joy he ran inside: "I love eating candy, lots and lots of candy!"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed again. He had just stepped outside the door, an extended hand had already met him.

He was not surprised, he knew early on that Sui Han San You must be waiting for him outside.

Mr. Gu Song: "Give it to me."

Lu Xiaofeng blinked his eyes, "Do you want money? Or do you want rice?"

Mr. Gu Song's face turned green from anger, he coldly replied, "Perhaps this time I want your life!"

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled, "I don't have either money or rice, but life? I have one."

Mr. Gu Song indignantly said, "Do you really want me to break your legs first before you are willing to give the Luochoa Tablet to me?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Even if you break my legs, I am not going to give the Luochoa Tablet to you."

Mr. Gu Song's countenance changed. "What do you want?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Let me ask you first: what do you want? When did I ever say that I am going to give the Luochoa Tablet to you?"

In stern voice Mr. Gu Song asked, "To whom are you going to give the Luochoa Tablet?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "The Blue Beard."

Mr. Gu Song: "Must you give it to him?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I must."

Mr. Gu Song: "Why?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because I want to exchange it with something!"

Mr. Gu Song: "What thing?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "My innocence."

Mr. Gu Song stared at him. He slowly said, "Are you telling me you have never thought of taking possession of the Luochoa Tablet yourself?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I have."

Mr. Gu Song: "And do you still want it now?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I do."

Mr. Gu Song's countenance changed again.

But Lu Xiaofeng unenthusiastically continued, "The things that I want are simply too many. Sometimes I want to be the Emperor, but I am afraid I would be lonely. Sometimes I want to be the Prime Minister, but I am afraid I would be too busy. Sometimes I want to get rich, but I am afraid someone might steal everything. Sometimes I want to take a wife, but I

am afraid it would be too troublesome. Sometimes I want to grill steak, but don't want to wash the pot. Sometimes I want to slap your face, but I am afraid I will only court disaster!"

He had not finished speaking, Mr. Gu Song already could not restrain from laughing, but in an instant his face turned wooden again. "Therefore, although what you want is many, actually you have not done a single one of them."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. With a bitter smile he said, "Those who think a lot but do a little in this world can't be only me."

Mr. Gu Song's eyes suddenly gazed into the distance, seemingly asking himself the question: what have I thought about, and what have I done?

As long as one lives in this world, one will always suffer some kind of limitation. If everybody is able to do whatever he wants to do, what would this world turn into?

It was quite a long time later that Mr. Gu Song finally sighed softly, he waved his hand and said, "Just go!"

Lu Xiaofeng let out a breath and said, "I thought you were not going to let me go this time, I am surprised that you still trust me this much."

With a wooden face Gu Song said coldly, "This is the last time!"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled, "Whenever you want to drink, you may look for me anytime, I will definitely accompany you."

He also waved his hand and was about to leave their presence when suddenly Han Mei said, "Wait a moment!"

Lu Xiaofeng had no choice but stop. "Do you have any other instructions?"

Han Mei: "I want to have a look at you."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "You may have as much look at me as you wish, I heard people say that my appearance is not bad."

But there was no smile on Han Mei's face, in fact, his face did not show any emotion as he coldly said, "I want to have a look not at your appearance!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "What do you want to see, then?"

Han Mei: "I want to see your martial art skill."

Lu Xiaofeng's smile turned into a bitter smile, "I suggest you'd better have a look at my appearance. I can guarantee that my martial art skill is not as good as my looks."

Yet Han Mei did not even cast a glance toward him. Suddenly he turned around and said, "Come with me!"

Lu Xiaofeng hesitated. He looked at Ku Zhu, and then at Gu Song, but

those two men's faces did not show any emotion either.

He sighed and had no choice but to follow Han Mei, but his mouth would not stop mumbling, "Where do you want to take me, exactly? Drinking or gambling, I will come with you anytime, but if you want to fight, I'd rather sneak off!"

Han Mei ignored him completely. Three turns and two blocks later, they were walking along the main street. There was a very big restaurant on the main street, with more than a dozen horse-drawn carriages parked by the front door. A pole with violet satin escort banner was planted at an angle outside the door. The banner fluttered in the wind, it was embroidered with a dragon and a large 'Zhao' character, as big as a tray.

Lu Xiaofeng recognized this banner, it belonged to the 'Golden Dragon Escort Agency'. Although it operated outside the Great Wall, serving mostly ginseng pickers from the Changbai Mountain area, inside the Great Wall its reputation was also resounding, because this escort agency's chief, 'Hei Xuan Tan' [Black and Mysterious (worship) Altar] Zhao Junwu, was originally a very famous escort of the Central Plains with stellar reputation. It was not too long ago that he was appointed the chief of the 'Golden Dragon Escort Agency' over a very generous compensation of his service.

Right now he happened to drink at this restaurant. A man with his reputation and status, naturally his style was not simple.

As soon as Han Mei stepped inside the restaurant, he went straight toward Zhao Junwu. He looked at him coldly and asked, "Are you Hei Xuan Tan Zhao Junwu?"

Zhao Junwu was startled. He looked at Han Mei up and down, sizing this neither a monk nor a priest, yet not uncouth, weird-looking old man. Usually his vision was very good, yet he failed to recognize this old fellow's origins. Not knowing how to respond differently, he nodded and said, "I am!"

Han Mei: "Do you know who I am?"

Zhao Junwu shook his head. "Please advice!"

Han Mei: "I am Mr. Han Mei of the Kunlun Mountains' Great Brightness Mirror's Sui Han San You, the Law Protector Elder of the Western Region's Devil Cult."

He pronounced each word very slowly. Hearing the four words Sui Han San You, Zhao Junwu's masked-like face suddenly fell; hearing the four words 'Western Region's Devil Cult', Zhao Junwu's forehead broke in cold sweats.

Han Mei: "Do you know who I am now?"

Immediately Zhao Junwu stood up and rushed to bow in respect: "Wanbei [younger generation] has eyes but fails to see, did not know the honorable presence of an immortal ..."

He was still prattling away all the flattering and polite greetings he could muster when Han Mei turned around back to face Lu Xiaofeng. "Do you know who he is?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I have heard about him."

Han Mei: "His reputation is not minor, his martial art skill is also not weak, but when he sees me, he is very respectful. On the contrary, you have never showed respect in our presence."

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled, "When he was little, his family must have brought him up really well, he is a man with good family education, always rather courteous to everybody."

Han Mei: "And you?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I am an orphan."

Han Mei: "And thus you did not have family education?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "No."

Han Mei: "In that case, you should receive some lessons."

Suddenly he turned around again. Pointing toward Lu Xiaofeng he asked, "Do you know who this man is?"

Zhao Junwu shook his head.

Han Mei: "You don't have to know. I only want you to give him a lesson

for me."

Zhao Junwu's countenance turned awkward, forcing a smile he said, "But Zaixia does not have any grudges with him, how can I ..."

Han Mei cut him off, he coldly said, "I am not going to force you. You may choose for yourself: do you want to teach him a lesson? Or do you want me to teach you a lesson?"

While speaking, he picked up a tin wine cup from the table and casually kneaded it in his hand. The wine cup immediately turned into a clump of shapeless tin. Again he casually pulled and the tin clump turned into a tin stick.

Zhao Junwu's countenance changed; suddenly, like an arrow he dashed forward, and with the back of his palm he ferociously struck the back of Lu Xiaofeng's head. It was a swift and vicious strike. Unexpectedly, once he made his move, he did not show the least bit of leniency.

Surprisingly, Lu Xiaofeng did not move at all. He stood on the same place, and let the palm strike land on the back of his neck.

There is a major artery to the left of the neck, one of the vital points on the human body. Although Zhao Junwu did not practice internal energy cultivation, his pair of hands was callous and hard as a rock. In reality, this strike was not light at all, if Lu Xiaofeng did not die, he should have at least fainted.

Who would have thought that he was still standing quietly, even his

face did not change at all.

Zhao Junwu's face was sweating instead; suddenly with a balled fist he struck in between Lu Xiaofeng's chest and abdomen as hard as he could.

Lu Xiaofeng also received this fist quietly, not even batting his eyelids.

By this time Zhao Junwu was sweating profusely. Twice he had attacked with all his might, and twice his attack did not fail to hit its target, but unfortunately it was as if he was hitting empty air. He felt as if the opponent was an empty space, as he exerted his strength on his palm and fist, it was as if his strength vanished into the thin air.

He had prepared the third attack, his fist was clenched, but in all honesty he did not know how he was going to attack!

Probably Lu Xiaofeng was also waiting to take the beating. But after waiting for half a day, suddenly a smile broke out on his face. "Have you given me enough lessons, Sire?" he asked.

Zhao Junwu also forced a smile, but even if right now there were some gold ingots falling from the sky in front of him, he would not be able to smile.

Lu Xiaofeng turned around to face Han Mei and said with a laugh, "Can I go now?"

Han Mei's countenance turned ugly, but before he could open his mouth, Ku Zhu already said, "You may go!"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled, "Thank you."

He patted his clothes, and then picked up a wine cup, which had not been flattened, from the table and poured the wine into his mouth, before finally he walked away from Han Mei in big strides.

But before he reached the stairs, an inn attendant rushed upstairs with a piece of letter in his hand, while shouting loudly, "Which one is Lu Xiaofeng, Lu Daxia [great hero]?"

Lu Xiaofeng pointed his own nose and laughed, "I am Lu Xiaofeng, but I am not a Daxia. Daxia only knows how to beat people, not to take a beating!"

There was only smile on his face, not a sign of anger, because he knew that in the world there are many people who take advantage of the weak but is afraid of the wicked. Bullies who were ten times worse than Zhao Junwu were simply more than a few. It was precisely the weakness of mankind.

He loved mankind deeply, he adored life; usually, it was very easy for him to forgive this kind of matter.

But when he finished reading the letter, he was very angry. Not only furious, he was anxious as well.

"Dear Xiaofeng Daxia, my brother:

Previously, about the a\$\$h01le you were pleased to bestow on me [see the end of Chapter 4], I am ashamed and dare not to accept, because I do not dare to receive the reward without any merit.

Presently, about Miss Chen Jingjing, I am concerned that she would inconvenience my brother's journey. Di [younger brother] has also hauled away a few taels of money. This I respectfully inform you.

Respectfully wishes your well-being!"

The signature below was Fei Tian Yu Hu!

When Lu Xiaofeng was reading the letter, Sui Han San You were also reading his expression.

They were also shocked because they had never expected Lu Xiaofeng's face would become such dreadful.

Therefore, when Lu Xiaofeng dashed out, they also rushed out behind him, leaving Zhao Junwu standing there in shock; the expression on his face was that of one who wishes he could smash his own head and die immediately.

Never in his dream would he imagine that the person he had just taught a lesson was precisely the world-famous Lu Xiaofeng.

Although Lu Xiaofeng had forgiven him, he would never be able to forgive himself. Although Lu Xiaofeng did not move a single muscle, actually it was he who gave him a lesson.

But Lu Xiaofeng had also made a mistake. He should not have left Chen Jingjing, he should not have left that house at all. By the time he arrived, the house had nearly turned into a blazing inferno.

Luckily the air was cold and the earth frozen, there were ice and snow everywhere that the fire did not spread too far. Not too many homes were burned down, but unavoidably there were many innocent people who became the victim of this fire.

Undoubtedly, Chen Jingjing's beautiful and tender body had also been burned like a pile of dry bones, and flew up piece by piece as sparking ashes.

Lu Xiaofeng had been too late.

The raging fire roasted his face red, it roasted his eyes red, but his hands and feet were actually icy-cold, his heart was also icy-cold.

The alley was a mass of confusion; the men were running around, shouting and trying to put out the fire, the women were screaming, and the children were crying. They were simple people, living a simple and tranquil life, they had never harmed anybody; but now, they had to suffer without any cause or reason.

Lu Xiaofeng turned around suddenly, he stared at Han Mei and sternly said, "Have you seen it?"

Han Mei: "Have seen what?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "This disaster is brought by you, can't you see it?"

Han Mei kept his mouth shut, obviously in his heart he did not feel good at all.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Do you still want to see my martial art skill now?"

Han Mei: "I have just seen it a moment ago."

Lu Xiaofeng: "A moment ago was my taking-a-beating skill. Don't you want to see my punch-someone skill?"

It was a challenge.

In all his life, he had never challenged anybody like this. Although his natural disposition was as cool-headed as a rock, this kind of stretched-almost-beyond-the-limit brutality had burned his anger to be more dreadful.

An extreme calmness; it was actually just another face of anger.

Han Mei stayed calm and collected. Under the flickering light of the blazing fire, his face seemed to look pale, even his lips were white.

No one had ever dared to challenge him face to face like this.

He was not afraid of this young man. Not at all. He had never been afraid of anybody. Yet in this instant, he suddenly felt some kind of nervousness he had never felt before. So nervous that even his breathing seemed to stop.

Because he had always been standing on the winning side. He was used to oppress other people based on his reputation and status. But actually now was the first time he felt somebody else was oppressing him.

Lu Xiaofeng's pressure came again: "Well? Do you or don't you want to see?"

Before Han Mei opened his mouth, Ku Zhu suddenly said, "He does not want to!"

Gu Song immediately caught on: "The only thing he wants to see is the LuoCha Tablet, and so do I."

He stepped in front of Lu Xiaofeng, giving Ku Zhu the opportunity to pull Han Mei away, and then he slowly continued, "Therefore, you must not disappoint us."

He did not turn his body around; still facing Lu Xiaofeng, he walked backwards, and then his long sleeve waved, his shadow flashed, and in an instant he had disappeared.

Lu Xiaofeng did not move, he did not try to stop them. Only after a long time did he finally exhaled slowly.

Suddenly he realized that he had yielded toward those three men for too long. Now the time had come that they should step back a bit.

It was the first time that he counterattacked. They did not fight, and yet he had scored a victory.

But he also knew that they would not retreat too far; if they were being pushed too far, who knows what the outcome would be?

Lu Xiaofeng did not want to think that far.

The fire was still blazing, he simply could not just stand there doing nothing. Although there were many things he needed to think through, everything must wait, right now the most important thing was helping to put out the fire.

He rolled up his sleeves and jumped into action. Snatching a water bucket from the man next to him, he leaped onto the top of the wall of the nearby house and splashed the water down.

Naturally his movements were a lot quicker than other people. The power of him, one man, was comparable to at least to that of five people. However, there was another man working side by side with him. Surprisingly, this man's movements were not too slow compared to him, so much so that the man seemed to work harder than Lu Xiaofeng. There was one time when that man leaped onto a burning wall and almost fell into the inferno below.

With the melting snow and ice wetting the burning timber, plus the joint effort of the people, the fire was quickly contained, and finally it was completely out.

At long last Lu Xiaofeng could take a breather. With his sleeve he wiped his perspiration, with such a good feeling in his heart, a feeling that he had not had for a very long time.

The man next to him was also catching his breath. With a broad smile in his face he said, "Altogether you poured seventy three buckets of water, and I poured six less buckets than you did!"

Lu Xiaofeng raised his head only to discover that the man working alongside him to put out the fire was none other than the Hei Xuan Tan, Zhao Junwu.

With an unrestrained laughter Zhao Junwu continued, "Not too long ago I was thinking of smashing my head and die, but now I want to live several years longer, the longer the better."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled, he did not ask 'why?', because he already knew the answer.

If you think that you are a useful person, you won't want to die, because you feel that your life is worth living, that your life deserves to be cherished.

If you have ever helped other people wholeheartedly, you would definitely understand this truth, because if you are willing to help others,

you are definitely a useful person.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled as he patted Zhao Junwu's shoulder. "I know that just now you put a lot more effort than anybody else. If you have hit me with the same zest, I would have not able to withstand!"

With blushing face Zhao Junwu laughed, "When I hit people, of course I won't do it with the same zest, because hitting people is not a delightful matter, besides, I am afraid I might hurt my own hand!"

The two of them broke out in laughter. It was only then did they realize that all around them people were also laughing, their eyes were brimming with happiness, admiration and gratitude.

A little girl, whose hair was combed into two long braids, suddenly emerged from the crowd and pulled their hands. She put some candy into their hands and with a blushing face she said, "This is my favorite candy, but I want you to have it, because you are good men. When I grow up, I want to be just like you, when other people's house is on fire, I am going to help putting it out!"

Lu Xiaofeng gently stroked her hair, he wanted to say something, but there seem to be something choking his throat.

Zhao Junwu also looked at her, he felt his tears almost falling down. In that moment he felt that if he were killed in the fire, it would have been worth it.

Right then a small black head suddenly appeared from a dirty and

narrow gutter at the side of the street. With finger pointed toward Lu Xiaofeng he shouted, "He is not a good man, he lied to me, Auntie did not give me any candy."

A little black boy crawled out from the gutter; unexpectedly, it was that filthy foolish-looking kid.

Surprisingly, he did not die; perhaps it was not because he was lucky, but because he was stupid and ignorant, because other than him, nobody, neither adult nor children, would be foolish enough to force himself into such a dirty sewer.

But he had eyes; not only that, he was in Chen Jingjing's room just a moment ago, and now he was the only witness who can tell what had been happening!

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes brightened, immediately he stepped forward to meet the boy. Could this boy depict the assailant's appearance? Although he did not have any confidence, at least there was some hope.

At that moment, suddenly from among the crowd someone shouted, "Although he helped putting out the fire, it was also him who set the fire in the first place. Everybody, don't be fooled by him!"

Yelling and screaming, several people charged toward Lu Xiaofeng; the situation immediately became chaotic. Although there were some who did not believe, some were skeptical, but some people whose houses were also burned could not distinguish between right and wrong, they were the ones who attacked Lu Xiaofeng.

They were simple-minded people; seeing their homes were burned, already their eyes were red with fury, and they attacked without any regard for their own safety.

Lu Xiaofeng did not blame them, he also did not want to fight them. Fortunately Zhao Junwu helped him to stop them. Although Lu Xiaofeng suffered several punches, he finally managed to get out; but that filthy kid had disappeared.

There were several dripping wet footprints by the gutter, the rubble of the burned down house was still emitting blue smoke.

Lu Xiaofeng gritted his teeth and suddenly entered the smoking rubble.

By this time several escorts working under Zhao Junwu had also arrived, and they helped suppressing the riot. Zhao Junwu made a personal guarantee that Lu Xiaofeng was drinking wine with him when the fire started, and only then did the riot subside. But when inquiry was made of who was the person who shouted the first time, nobody knew.

Lu Xiaofeng was still in the midst of scalding rubble, nobody knew what was he looking for?

“What were you looking for?”

As soon as they left the fire location, Zhao Junwu could not bear not to ask, but Lu Xiaofeng did not answer.

His eyes were gleaming with a very strange expression, yet nobody

knew what kind of difficult problem he was pondering about, or perhaps he had solved this difficult problem.

Zhao Junwu did not ask anymore, he started to ponder on his own. He suddenly said, "The person who accuse you a moment ago must be the same person who started the fire, and he wanted you to take the blame."

Lu Xiaofeng was silent for a long time before he slowly said, "They did not want to shift the blame on me, but they wanted to shut someone's mouth."

Zhao Junwu: "Shut whose mouth? That dumb kid who crawl from the sewer?" Lu Xiaofeng nodded.

Zhao Junwu frowned, "That kind of dumb kid, what does he know?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, "They really should have not done it!"

Zhao Junwu also sighed, "Whatever it was, it's in the past now. Let us have a drink."

Lu Xiaofeng: "If you want me to drink with you, I am afraid you must wait."

Zhao Junwu: "Why?"

Lu Xiaofeng clenched both of his fists and said word by word, "If I cannot find Fei Tian Yu Hu, henceforth I am not going to drink a single

drop of wine."

Zhao Junwu: "Can I do something for you?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You can!"

Zhao Junwu: "Tell me."

Lu Xiaofeng: "You are much more familiar with this area than me, I want you ..."

All of a sudden he lowered his voice a lot as if he was afraid others might hear it, because now he knew that Fei Tian Yu Hu's influence reached as far as this place; it was far greater than he previously imagined.

When he finished speaking, Zhao Junwu immediately responded, "I will definitely do it for you; but when I get all the information you need, how am I going to pass it on to you?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Have you ever gambled at the Silver Hook Casino?"

Zhao Junwu laughed, "Not only I have been there, I have gambled with that Big Beard several times and I even won several hundred taels of silver from him!" [Before you freak out, no, it is not a mistake, the text (both online and the book) does say 'Big Beard' and not 'Blue Beard'.]

Lu Xiaofeng: "Half a month from today, we will meet there. Whoever

comes first must wait for the other, don't leave without seeing each other!"

Zhao Junwu stared at him, and then suddenly said, "Thank you!"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "I want you to do something for me, I have not thanked you and you thanked me instead?"

Zhao Junwu: "It is exactly because you have not thanked me that I must thank you!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "And why is that?"

Zhao Junwu's eyes shone as he said, "Because I know for certain that you consider me as your friend!"

A friend! What an honorable and glorious word! What a beautiful word!

If you are like Lu Xiaofeng, accept people with love and respect, you must understand one thing first – the true power that can subdue other people is not the brute force of martial arts, but rather, it is patience and compassion.

It is not an easy thing to do, other than broad-mindedness, it also requires an immense amount of valor!

The room was decorated in a serene and elegant, as well as neat, style. The snow-white paper covering the window seemed to be replaced only

recently. Outside the window, the air was clear, the sun was shining bright. The window sill was adorned with pots of narcissus and chimonanthus praecox (腊梅). Surprisingly, Ding Xiangyi was already able to sit up. Her originally pale face had shown some color; it was like a dying, withered flower suddenly had its life back.

All of these things were very pleasant things, Lu Xiaofeng's mood was also definitely better than just a few days ago.

"I promised I would come back, and I definitely come back to see you!"

"I know!" Unexpectedly, Ding Xiangyi's face showed a gentle and tender smile, "I know you will definitely come back!"

She sat leaning on the bed. The bed sheet had just been replaced. She was wearing a warm and comfortable, loose robe; the robe was very long, the sleeves were also very long, completely covering her cut feet and cut hands. The sun light streamed in through the snow-white window paper, illuminating her still-very-beautiful face.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled and said, "I also brought something with me!"

Ding Xiangyi's eyes shone, "The Luocha Tablet?" she asked excitedly.

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. "What I promised to you, I will certainly deliver it, I did not lie to you!"

Ding Xiangyi blinked a couple of times, "Are you saying I lied to you?"

Lu Xiaofeng pulled a chair and sat down. "You told me that Chen Jingjing was your good friend and that I can trust her!"

Ding Xiangyi replied in affirmative.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Was she really your good friend? Can you really trust her?"

Ding Xiangyi turned her head away to avoid his gaze. Suddenly her breathing became rapid, as if she had difficulty controlling herself. After quite a long time afterwards, she still could not restrain from spitefully said, "She is a *****!"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "Yet you wanted me to trust a *****!"

Finally Ding Xiangyi turned back around and forced a smile, "Because I am a woman. Which woman does not frequently ask men to do things she herself is not willing to do?"

Frankly, this reasoning was not good, but Lu Xiaofeng seemed to be very satisfied; because she was a woman, and he knew better than to reason with a woman, which probably would be as difficult as pushing camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

Ding Xiangyi suddenly asked, "She has died, has she not?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Mmm."

Ding Xiangyi gently let out a breath; her expression looked like someone who had just spat a mouthful of thick phlegm.

Lu Xiaofeng stared hard at her, suddenly he asked, "How do you know she has died?"

Again Ding Xiangyi turned her head the other way; she lightly coughed twice before she slowly said, "I did not know, it was nothing more than a wild guess!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "How did you come into that conclusion?"

Ding Xiangyi: "By the way you asked me about her a moment ago, I can see that she has done many things to you that were offensive and she personally wronged you, a woman like her certainly did not deserve to live long!"

This reasoning was even worse, but surprisingly, Lu Xiaofeng also accepted it. "No matter what, I managed to get the Luocha Tablet back at long last, my trip has not been in vain!"

Hearing the word 'Luocha Tablet', Ding Xiangyi's eyes brightened again. She watched as Lu Xiaofeng put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a piece of jade tablet. Suddenly she burst into tears.

Lu Xiaofeng understood her feelings.

For this jade tablet, she did not hesitate to destroy her own marriage, to destroy her own life-long happiness; even she herself had turned into a

crippled person.

Although this piece of jade was a priceless treasure, the value of happiness is even more beyond measure.

Was her sacrifice worth it? And now, didn't she regret what she had done?

Lu Xiaofeng could not restrain from sighing. "If this thing is mine, I would certainly give it to you, but now ..."

Ding Xiangyi interrupted him. "I understand, you don't have to explain it to me. Even if you give this to me now, I do not have any use of it!"

She broke into tears again, and then continued slowly, "Now, I would be well satisfied just to look at it, to caress it!"

Lu Xiaofeng also understood her feelings, immediately he handed the LuoCha Tablet to her, but Ding Xiangyi's expression actually looked even more painful.

She had lost her hands. This piece of jade tablet, for which she did not hesitate to sacrifice everything, was finally in her presence, but she had no way of reaching out to take it. Certainly not everybody would be able to endure this kind of pain, yet clearly she was able to endure it.

Lu Xiaofeng could not refrain from heaving a sigh. Forcing a smile he said, "Why don't I place it on your body? At least you can see it a bit more clearly!"

Ding Xiangyi nodded. Seeing Lu Xiaofeng gently placed the jade tablet on her chest, her tearful eyes suddenly revealed an unexplainable feeling. Was it gratitude? Was it satisfaction? Or was it sorrow?

Under the bright sunlight from the window, the jade tablet seemed to emit a soft and beautiful luster, so much so that the shininess felt warm.

Ding Xiangyi lowered her head and kissed the jade tablet gently with her lips, as if she was gently kissing her first love's sweetheart.

"Thank you, thank you ..."

She did not stop saying 'thank you' while clamping the jade tablet with her handless wrists and pressed it gently on her own face.

Lu Xiaofeng could not bear to look at her. He remembered her hands used to be slim, tender and beautiful, with her nails always painted with a layer of dull-colored rose juice, making her hands also look like blooming roses.

But now the roses had been mercilessly plucked out, leaving a pair of withered stems, bald and ugly.

A plucked rose will bloom again the following year, but her hands ...

Lu Xiaofeng stood up and turned around. Suddenly he heard a 'puff!' sound, as something flew out through the window, followed by a 'swish!'

noise as something flew in through the window.

Quickly he turned his head around. The jade tablet clamped between Ding Xiangyi's wrists had disappeared, but from her chest blood was gushing out like a fountain.

Her captivating pink cheeks became bloodless instantly, her eyes and the corner of her mouth did not stop twitching, as if she was crying, but perhaps she was smiling.

But even if she was smiling, it was such a forced smile, a smile out of desolate and painful heart, a smile which was even more sorrowful than crying.

She looked at Lu Xiaofeng, her eyes had also lost their gleam, which was replaced with a dead grey color. With her last ounce of strength she said, "Why ... why don't you pursue?"

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head. There was only sympathy and compassion on his face, he did not show the least bit of surprise or anger.

It seemed that everything Ding Xiangyi said or done had been anticipated by him from early on. It was after a long time had passed did he finally say with sorrow in his voice, "Have you been deceived by others?"

Ding Xiangyi's voice grew fainter and fainter, "I deceived you, in turn, he deceived me. Seems to me that everybody is destined to be deceived one way or the other by someone else; don't you think so? Don't you ...?"

Her voice was very soft, and very slow, but there was not a trace of sorrow or pain in it.

In that instant when death was knocking on her door, she suddenly understood the complex and subtle yet simple philosophy of life, she suddenly understood that life was just like that.

And then her life had ended.

Why do people always wait for the last second of their lives to understand the matter, which they should have understood much, much earlier?

Chapter 10 – Enlightenment Before Death

Night, winter night.

The dark and long alley was quiet, there was nobody, there was only a lantern.

An old, battered white lantern, so old that the white had turned into a deathly grey, hanging in an angle above the narrow door at the very end of the long alley. Actually, there was a shiny silver hook dangling under the lantern, just like the fishhook that the fishermen use to catch fish.

The silver hook kept swaying in the cold wind. The wind seemed to sigh, sighing over why would there be so many people in this world who were willing to let themselves being caught by this silver hook?

From the gloomy and damp cold fog outside, Fang Yufei entered the brilliantly illuminated Silver Hook Casino. Taking off his white cloak, he revealed an extremely well-fitting, specially tailored, exquisite silver-colored satin garment.

Every day, he was happiest around this time, especially today.

Because Lu Xiaofeng had returned. Lu Xiaofeng had always been a friend he was most fond of, a friend he respected the most.

Naturally Lu Xiaofeng himself was even happier, because he was back, back from the frozen wasteland, the faraway ice country.

The luxuriously decorated hall was brimming with warmth and gaiety. The aroma of wine mixed with the fragrance of high-quality cosmetics; the intermittent jingling of silver coins was pleasant to the ears, no music in this world was more melodious than this kind of noise.

Lu Xiaofeng liked to hear this kind of noise, just like the majority of people in the world, he also liked luxury and enjoyed life to the fullest.

Especially now.

After going through many days of arduous journey and back to this place, he was like a lost child who was back to his warm home, back to his mother's bosom.

That he was able to return safe and sound, in itself was truly not an easy matter.

He had just taken a hot bath, and changed into a brand new set of clothes. The fake beard under his chin, the fake wrinkles on the corner of his eyes, the white powder on his hair, everything had been completely washed out.

Right now his face was glowing, his body was full of energy; indeed, even he himself was very pleased with his appearance.

In the main hall there were several women who were stealing glances toward him from the corner of their eyes. Although all of those women were middle-aged, they still looked attractive. Lu Xiaofeng flashed them

his most moving smile.

As long as he could make others happy, while not bringing any harm to him, he had never refused to do so.

Seeing his smiling face, even Fang Yufei was very happy. "You seem to like this place very much," he said with a laugh.

Lu Xiaofeng: "It seems to me that the number of people who like this place is growing."

Fang Yufei: "Indeed the business of this place has grown by leaps and bounds. Perhaps it's nothing more than because nowadays everybody has quite some extra time in their hands and live rather comfortably, plus the weather is cold; nothing is better than staying inside, gambling and drinking wine."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "Is it true that many women come here especially to see you?"

Fang Yufei burst out in laughter.

He was indeed a very attractive man, his appearance was clean, his clothing impeccable, his figure was always well-maintained. Although sometimes he looked somewhat artificial, his type was exactly what middle-aged women of high and respected position liked most.

Lowering his voice, Lu Xiaofeng said, "I believe you have attracted quite a few of women in this place!"

Fang Yufei did not deny at all, he smiled and said, "From all the people who day in and day out come and go to the casino to gamble, how many are decent and honorable?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "How about people who operate a casino? Are they also ..."

He stopped abruptly because right that moment he saw someone with a dagger in his hand was pouncing Fang Yufei from behind, with the dagger lunged toward his lower left waist.

Fang Yufei did not see the attack, because he did not have eyes on his back.

By the time Lu Xiaofeng saw it, it was already too late because this man's dagger was already less than a foot from Fang Yufei's waist.

This part is a vital point of the human body, one dagger stab may be fatal; even Lu Xiaofeng could not help but shed some cold sweats.

Who would have thought that in a flash Fang Yufei's waist twisted suddenly and reaching backward, he grabbed the dagger-holding wrist of that man. 'Ding!' the dagger fell down to the floor. The man opened his mouth to curse, but he only managed to shout one word, his mouth had already covered by two large men who suddenly appeared behind him. With one man on each side, he was dragged outside immediately.

Surprisingly, Fang Yufei's expression did not change at all. With a smile he said, "This kind of matter happens every day in this place."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Do you know why he wanted to kill you?"

Indifferently Fang Yufei replied, "If he is not drunk, then he must have lost a lot of money."

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled, "Or perhaps he is simply wild with rage!"

Fang Yufei: "Why is that?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because you made him to wear a green hat!" [cuckold, a man whose wife was cheating on him] Fang Yufei laughed aloud.

In his opinion, making a man to wear a green hat was undoubtedly a very honorable achievement, something which would give him a lot of face. Whoever able to do it would not need to be ashamed nor feel sorry.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at him as if it was the first time that he saw this person.

The incident just a moment ago happened so quick and also finished very suddenly, but it had created a small disturbance nonetheless, particularly to those people who gambled on the nearby tables. Most people left their seats and talked about what had happened in low murmur.

Only one person did not move, he was still sitting on his seat, staring at the two tiles of 'Pai Jiu' [Pai Gow, Chinese dominoes] in front of him as if

he was entranced. Apparently in this game of Pai Jiu, if he had not won big, then he must have had lost not a few.

The man was wearing a mink fur cap on his head, an inside out large fur-lined coat and he had a full beard. Obviously he was a ginseng picker who had just returned from outside the great wall. The folding purse inserted in his trouser belt on his waist was packed with hard-earned money after toiling for half a year, which he was prepared to lose in just one night.

Fang Yufei also lowered his voice, "Looks to me you are eager to win his money."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Spending money won on the gambling table is the most fun; how can I let this kind of opportunity pass?"

Fang Yufei: "But my brother-in-law has been waiting for you inside for a long time, I also heard that those three old freaks are already here early on!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "They can wait, but this man's money cannot, he may spend it all very soon!"

Fang Yufei laughed, "Make sense!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "That's why you'd better go in and tell them that I will be there in a moment!"

Without waiting for Fang Yufei to reply, he had already walked over to

join the Pai Jiu table, and happened to sit right next to the bearded ginseng picker. "What do you say, other than playing against the dealer, we also play against each other?" he said with a smile.

"You're on!" the large bearded man agreed immediately, "The bigger the stake, the more fun it is for me. How much do you want to bet?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "If we want to have a satisfying game, whatever your bet, I will match you!"

Looking at them, Fang Yufei smiled and shook his head. Suddenly he felt his own hands were itching to play.

When he had walked around the table to go to the back, Lu Xiaofeng suddenly gripped this bearded man's hand under the table.

The Blue Beard was admiring his own hands.

He had always taken a very good care of his hands, the nails were well-manicured, the fingers were slender and elegant.

Truly a very attractive pair of hands, without a doubt, it was also a very sensitive pair of hands.

His hands were laid flat on the table, where Fang Yuxiang could see them clearly. Even Gu Song, Ku Zhu and Han Mei could also see them clearly.

Although they were all looking at the same pair of hands, the thought they had in their hearts were completely different.

Even if she wanted to, Fang Yuxiang could not deny that these hands were indeed very attractive, very clean, but who knows this pair of seemingly clean hands had done how many dirty works? Killed how many people? Taken off how many girls' clothes?

Thinking about the last thing, her face blushed slightly. She recalled the first time this pair of hands took her clothes off, and her feelings when the hands gently caressed her body. Even she herself was not sure what kind of feeling exactly did she feel?

Sui Han San You were asking themselves, "Other than caressing women and playing tiles [Translator's note: 'tiles' as in 'mahjong tiles' or 'Chinese domino tiles'], what else is this pair of hands capable of doing?"

This pair of hands did not look like hands that were trained hard in martial arts, but what difference did it have with Lu Xiaofeng's hands?

And what was Blue Beard himself thinking? It seemed like nobody has ever been able to see through his mind.

Fang Yufei had been there for a long time. Finally he could not bear not to cough lightly, "He is here!"

Fang Yuxiang: "Where is he? Why didn't he come in?"

Fang Yufei smiled, "Because incidentally he saw the Pai Jiu table, and

also incidentally saw a fool with more money than senses!"

Just like anybody who loves to gamble, if he sees these two things at once, even if his wife is expecting their first child, he will immediately forget his child.

With a cold laugh Han Mei said, "Turns out he is not only a follower of wine and women, he is also a compulsive gambler!"

Fang Yufei: "Men who love wine and women but do not gamble, I am afraid there are not too many."

Fang Yuxiang cast a glance at him and said, "You seem to understand these kinds of people very much, because you are one of them."

Fang Yufei sighed and said, "The crows in the world are all black, as a matter of fact, not one of us, men, is a good thing!"

Actually, it was the scold women use against men, but had scolded himself first.

Fang Yuxiang also laughed. Obviously she was a good sister, not only she was very fond of her older brother, she was also very affectionate.

Blue Beard suddenly asked, "What kind of man is this fool?"

Fang Yufei: "He is a ginseng picker from outside the Wall, he is surnamed Zhang, called Zhang Bin."

Blue Beard: "Does this man wear a mouthful beard?"

Fang Yufei: "That's right!"

Blue Beard drily said, "If the beard is not wrong, then you are wrong!"

Fang Yufei: "In what way am I wrong?"

Blue Beard: "In what way you are wrong? That man is not a ginseng picker, and his name is not Zhang Bin!"

Fang Yufei: "Oh!"

Blue Beard: "He is an escort, his surname is Zhao, he is called Zhao Junwu!"

Fang Yufei thought for a moment then asked, "Is he the Hei Xuan Tan Zhao Junwu?"

Blue Beard: "There is only one Zhao Junwu!"

Fang Yufei: "Has he been here before?"

Blue Beard: "Escorts who pass by this area, at least nine out of ten have visited this place!"

Fang Yufei: "If he has been here openly before, why does he have to be in disguise this time?"

Blue Beard: "Why don't you go ask him yourself?"

Fang Yufei did not say anything, his eyes revealed some kind of very strange expression. By this time Blue Beard had already put his hands below the table, but Gu Song actually stretched out his hand.

At long last Lu Xiaofeng came in.

Gu Song put out a hand, "Give it to me."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "If you want money, this is not a good time, because incidentally, all my money has been wiped out clean."

Surprisingly, Gu Song was not angry, he indifferently said, "Probably in the beginning you wanted to win other people's money."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, with a bitter smile he said, "It was exactly because I wanted to win other people's money that I ended up losing it all. People who can lose everything are usually those who want to win everything!"

With a cold laugh Gu Song said, "Don't tell me you also lost the LuoCha Tablet!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "If I have the LuoCha Tablet with me, perhaps I would also lose it!"

Gu Song: "You don't have the Luocha Tablet with you?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "At first I had it!"

Gu Song: "And now?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "And now it's gone!"

Gu Song looked at him, his face did not show the slightest bit of emotion, but the pupils of his eyes suddenly shrank.

Yet Lu Xiaofeng only laughed, "Although the Luocha Tablet is gone, I still am not dead yet!"

Gu Song coldly said, "Why don't you die?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because I am still prepared to get the Luocha Tablet back for you!"

Gu Song could not restrain his countenance from changing. "You can get it back?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. "If you really want it, I can get it back for you any time, but ..."

Gu Song: "But what?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I suggest you'd better not look for it, because if you get it back, you will certainly be even angrier!"

Gu Song: "Why?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because that Luocha Tablet is also fake!"

Blue Beard raised his hands above the table again, Gu Song also raised his hands above the table.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, "Altogether I found two Luocha Tablets, it's just too bad that both are fakes!"

Everybody was listening, they waited for his explanation.

Lu Xiaofeng: "The first tablet I found from inside the frozen river, so we can call it the Binghe [frozen river] Tablet for the time being. The second tablet I snatched away from someone else's hand with a horsewhip, so there is no harm in us calling it the Shenbian [divine whip] Tablet, because people say my whip technique is simply divine!"

Gu Song: "The Shenbian Tablet was stolen by Li Xia, and it was swapped with the Binghe Tablet by Chen Jingjing, which was then fallen into your hand!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Absolutely correct!"

Gu Song: "Then it is definitely not fake!"

Lu Xiaofeng sigh: "I also thought that it was impossible for it to be fake, but the fact is: it is fake!"

Gu Song sneered, "How can you tell whether the Luocha Tablet is real or fake?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Indeed at first I could not, but in the end I can!"

Gu Song: "How can you tell?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because I happen to have a friend by the name of Zhu Ting, and he happened to be the one counterfeiting the Shenbian Tablet!"

Gu Song: "Do you happen to speak about Zhu Ting whose nickname is 'The Boss'?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You know him?"

Gu Song: "I have heard!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Although this man has never wished to do anything exceptional, he is actually a hundred-percent genius. Whatever strange, bizarre object you can think of, he can make it for you. Counterfeiting painting, calligraphy, or some jade and stone, he is simply the best in the world."

Talking about this man Zhu Ting, he could not restrain his face from revealing a smile.

Zhu Ting was not only his old friend, he was also his good friend. In the 'Princess Danfeng' case, if not because of Zhu Ting, he might still be locked up in the Green Shirt Pavilion headquarters at the back of the waist of the mountain even until now.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed again, with a wry smile he said, "If not because of him, I would not have these many troubles right now, he has given me a lot of troubles, he gave me practically a lot more troubles than all my friends put together!"

Gu Song: "He is also your friend?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Uh huh."

Gu Song: "Who wanted him to forge the Shenbian Tablet? Have you asked him?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I haven't!"

Gu Song: "And why?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because we haven't spoken to each other for at least a couple of years."

Gu Song: "You and he are friends, yet you do not speak to each other?"

With a bitter smile Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Because he is a big bad egg, and probably I am not much different."

With a cold laugh Gu Song said, "If anybody believes you, then he is also a big bad egg!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You don't believe me?"

Gu Song: "I don't care if that Shenbian Tablet is a fake article or not, I simply must see it with my own eyes."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I told you, if you really want it, I can get it back to you any time!"

Gu Song: "Where are you going to get it?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Here!"

Gu Song's countenance fell, "In this room?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Perhaps right now it is not here yet, but when I blow out the lamp and read some incantation, by the time the lantern is shining again, that jade tablet will certainly be on this table."

Blue Beard laughed, Fang Yufei also laughed; this kind of out-of-the-

world matter, if anybody believed it, it was just like seeing ghost in the middle of the day.

Fang Yuxiang also could not bear not to laugh, "Do you really think anybody would believe this kind of nonsense?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "There is at least one person who will believe me!"

Fang Yuxiang: "Who?"

Gu Song suddenly stood up and blew the first lantern, "Me."

There were three lanterns in the room, when all three were snuffed out, the secret room, which was underground to begin with, became pitch black that nobody could even see their own fingers in front of their noses.

In the darkness, they only heard Lu Xiaofeng's low voice drone on and on. Perhaps it was really some kind of mystical magician's spell, yet if one was listening carefully, one seemed to hear some names being repeated over and over, 'Laohekou [city in Hubei], Tongde Hall, Feng family shop, Blind Feng Erzi [number two kid ...]' But whatever he was saying, his voice sounded really mysterious and weird.

Everybody seemed to hear everybody else's heartbeat, and one or two persons' heart seemed to beat faster and faster, as if they started to get really anxious. It was a pity that the room was just too dark, nobody could see anybody else's expressions, let alone guess which one was it.

While this person's heart was beating faster and faster, Lu Xiaofeng's

incantation was also getting faster and faster. Over and over, nobody knew how many times he muttered the same thing. Suddenly he shouted, "Light up!"

A flame flickered, one of the lantern was lighted up. Unexpectedly there really was a piece of jade tablet under the light.

Under the bright light of the lantern, the jade tablet's gloss looked soft and beautiful, while the faces of the people were actually so pale that there was a hint of green in their white faces.

Everybody's expressions looked about the same, their eyes brimming with amazement.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed smugly while sweeping everybody's face with his gaze. He suddenly said, "And now, do you all believe in my nonsense?"

Fang Yuxiang sighed and said, "Actually, I should have believed you, because you are in actuality a living ghost."

Gu Song coldly said, "But this piece of jade is not ghost, even more, it is not alive, it cannot fly by itself from outside."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Of course it can't!"

Gu Song: "Then how did it end up in here?"

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled, "It's none of your business. If you ask too much,

perhaps it will suddenly fly away again!”

Of course it would not fly away on its own, just like it was impossible for it to fly in on its own, but Gu Song really did not ask again. This was exactly what he was asking for, now that he got it, why would he ask too many questions?

He stared at the jade tablet on the table, but actually did not reach out, he did not touch it even once.

From Yu Tianbao’s hands this jade tablet was handed over to the Blue Beard, which was then stolen by Li Xia and taken away. In turn, it was swindled by Chen Jingjing, and again passed through Chuchu’s hand, followed by Lu Xiaofeng and Ding Xiangyi, and in the end, whose hands had it fallen to?

Under the bright light of the lantern, although it was still spotless, sparkling and translucent, actually it had been dyed red by blood; the blood of ten human beings, ten lives. Was their sacrifice worth it?

Gu Song suddenly heaved a deep, deep sigh, “Unavoidably all those people’s deaths are too unjustifiable.”

Blue Beard: “All those people?”

Gu Song: “All those people who died for it!”

Blue Beard: “Actually, is this jade tablet a genuine article or a fake one?”

Gu Song: "It's fake!"

Then he slowly continued, "The carvings on the top indeed can be confused as the real one, but the substance of the jade lacks too much from the real one!"

Blue Beard was silent for a long time. Finally he turned his gaze toward Lu Xiaofeng and asked, "Did you really snatch this tablet away from Jingjing's hand?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded.

Blue Beard also sighed, he sadly said, "She was still young and very bright, actually, she might have a very bright future, but she sacrificed her own life for this fake article not worth a 'wen' [copper coin], was it really worth the trouble?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "She did all that because she had never thought that this jade tablet is a fake." Blue Beard agreed.

Lu Xiaofeng: "She was a very careful person, if she had the least bit of suspicion, she would never have braved this kind of danger."

Blue Beard also agreed, "Indeed the way she conduct her business was always very meticulous."

Lu Xiaofeng: "But this time she did not suspect anything, only because

she knew that the jade tablet was indeed stolen by Li Xia from your place in here. It is very possible that that time she was at her side, witnessing everything."

Blue Beard sighed, "Too bad Chen Jingjing has forgotten that Li Xia was also a very astute and cautious woman."

Lu Xiaofeng: "You think the real Luocha Tablet was taken away by Li Xia?"

Blue Beard: "You think otherwise?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I only know that Ding Xiangyi and Chen Jingjing had known her since they were little girls, no one knew her like they did. Their view of her must not be wrong."

Blue Beard: "And their view of her was ...?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "That other than gold and men, she did not care much about anything else. It was even more impossible for her to venture into this kind of trouble."

Blue Beard: "So you are telling me that the Luocha Tablet Li Xia stole was a fake one?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "That's right."

Blue Beard: "Well then, where is the real Luocha Tablet?"

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled, then suddenly he replied that question with a question: "On this plate there is a stuffed steamed bun, and then there is a plain steamed bun; if I ate one and the stuffed steamed bun is still on the plate, what does that mean?"

Blue Beard also chuckled, "If you ate the plain steamed bun, naturally the stuffed steamed bun is still on the plate."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Isn't this logic very simple?"

Blue Beard: "Very simple."

Lu Xiaofeng: "If the Luocha Tablet Li Xia stole was a fake, the one Chen Jingjing swapped was also a fake, where is the real Luocha Tablet?"

Blue Beard: "I also cannot think it through."

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled again, "Actually, the logic behind it is as simple as the stuffed steamed bun on the plate; if you do not suddenly turn stupid, you should be able to think it through."

Blue Beard: "Oh?"

Lu Xiaofeng said matter-of-factly, "If all the Luocha Tablets in other people's hands are fake then the real one is without a doubt still in your hands."

Blue Beard laughed.

He was always polite, always graceful; his laughter was equally polite and graceful.

But when he laughed, he had never looked at others; he had always looked at his own pair of hands.

Wasn't this pair of hands similar to the Luocho Tablet on the table? Although the hands looked spotlessly white and neat, they were actually reeking with blood.

Lu Xiaofeng: "You deliberately created the opportunity for Li Xia to steal the fake Luocho Tablet ..."

Still smiling, Blue Beard interrupted him, "Why would I do that?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "This is precisely the most crucial point of your grand plan. After Li Xia fell into your trap, only then your plan has proceeded step by step."

There was wine on the table.

Blue Beard poured a cup full then used both his hands to lift it up and let the heat from his palms to slowly warm the wine; only then he slowly drank it down.

Each one of his movements was very graceful, his facial expression was

even more relaxed, as if he was listening to a very amusing story.

Lu Xiaofeng: "For a long time you have loathed Li Xia and have been weary of her, because as she grew older, her need of men also grew bigger. You wanted to take this opportunity to let her go away as far as possible on her own account, as well as forever she would not dare to come back and see you again. This is exactly the first step in your plan."

Blue Beard slurped his wine noisily, and then he sighed and said, "Good wine."

Lu Xiaofeng: "You knew the relationship between Li Xia and Ding Xiangyi, you have predicted that Li Xia would definitely go to look for her. This is also another step of your plan, because you have known early on that she was not being faithful to you, you wanted to use this opportunity to test her, to find out who her lover was."

Blue Beard laughed, "Why would I want to test her? She was not my wife."

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed, "She was not?"

Blue Beard: "Her husband is Fei Tian Yu Hu, not me."

Lu Xiaofeng stared hard at him, he said word by word, "Who is Fei Tian Yu Hu? Not you?"

Blue Beard burst out in laughter, as if he had never heard such a ridiculous matter before; he laughed until he was nearly choked by the

wine.

But Lu Xiaofeng no longer laughed, he slowly said, "Fei Tian Yu Hu is an extremely ambitious man; he cannot coexist with the Western Region Devil Cult. But this time he did not join the race to get the Luochoa Tablet, because he knew early on that the Luochoa Tablet fight was over a fake one."

Blue Beard was still laughing, but suddenly 'Crack!' the wine cup in his hand broke since he squeezed it.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "Ding Xiangyi did not know that Fei Tian Yu Hu is the Blue Beard, because when she met the Blue Beard, what she saw was a big man with face full of beard. She had never suspected this point, because, just like everybody else, she had always believed the Blue Beard is someone with beard, otherwise, why would he be called the Blue Beard?"

He continued in a cold voice, "Perhaps the only person who knew your secret is only Fang Yuxiang. It is even possible that she found it out only after a very long time, because it was just recently that she found you in here."

Fang Yuxiang's face did not show any emotion. She slowly stood up to get a golden cup from the cupboard behind them and wiped it clean with a pure white handkerchief before pouring a cup of wine for the Blue Beard.

Blue Beard gently held her hand, unexpectedly, his eyes suddenly turned warm and gentle.

Lu Xiaofeng: "You used Blue Beard's identity as a cover. Originally it was very difficult for other people to uncover his secret. When she found you, originally you wanted to kill her to shut her mouth, but you did not have the heart to do so, because in all honesty she is very captivating. You were afraid she might reveal your secret out of jealousy, so you were forced to send the other four women away."

Fang Yufei had been standing quietly on the side, listening to them. When even Han Mei and Ku Zhu did not open their mouths, naturally his chance of butting in was even slimmer.

But now he suddenly asked a question which should not be asked, "Since you have acknowledged that his use of the Blue Beard identity as a cover is a very intelligent move, how did you find out this secret?"

Blue Beard's countenance changed abruptly; Fang Yufei's question was nothing other than admitting that he also knew that Blue Beard and Fei Tian Yu Hu were identical.

But Lu Xiaofeng only laughed and said indifferently, "I don't care how thorough his plan was, unavoidably there are some flaws.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "Actually, he should not have ordered you and Fang Yuxiang to deal with Ding Xiangyi. If Ding Xiangyi was not his wife, he would not tell you to deal with her with such cruelty, even more, he should not mind other people's business."

Fang Yufei's eyes seemed to show a painful feeling; he slowly lowered his head and no longer said anything.

Blue Beard coldly said, "How do you know I was the one sending him out? How do you know he is not Fei Tian Yu Hu?"

Lu Xiaofeng's answer was plain and simple, "Because I am his old friend."

Blue Beard also closed his mouth.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly chuckled and said, "I also have another friend, you know him too; seems like you lost to him several hundred taels of silver."

Blue Beard: "Are you talking about Zhao Junwu?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded, "He has met the Blue Beard, who was also a big man with face full of beard. Naturally other people also see the same."

Blue Beard coldly said, "Yet the Blue Beard you met did not have any beard."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled, "You must know that for some people, even a single grain of sand will not enter their eyes, much less a large clump of fake beard."

Blue Beard: "And you are one of those people?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Don't tell me you are not?" Blue Beard only laughed

coldly.

"Not only you have known about Ding Xiangyi's affair for a long time, you also knew who her lover was. By doing what you did, not only you seized the opportunity to kill them, you could also divert other people's attention."

Gu Song suddenly said coldly, "What you mean by 'other people' must be me."

Lu Xiaofeng: "That's exactly what I meant."

Gu Song: "What about you?"

With a bitter smile Lu Xiaofeng said, "I am merely the puppet he exploited as bait, nothing more than the rabbit some people would release when they are hunting for a fox."

If one was comparing oneself to a rabbit, it must be because one's heart was extremely upset. Whoever discovered that he had just been exploited by others, naturally would not feel good in his heart.

Gu Song: "But the rabbit will always run all over the place in the front, wherever it goes, the fox can only run after it."

Lu Xiaofeng: "When you see he spared no effort just to get me to retrieve the Luochoa Tablet for him, naturally you would not suspect that the Luochoa Tablet is still in his hands." Gu Song agreed.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Whether I can get the Luochoa Tablet back, whether the Luochoa Tablet I found is genuine or a fake, it has nothing to do with him, because he has already shifted all responsibility on me."

Gu Song: "And if anything went wrong with the Luochoa Tablet in your possession, the one we are going to look for definitely will be you."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, "The journey was truly long, it was practically the same as if we were being banished from the civilization. Along the way we were cold and hungry, while he was sitting comfortably by the fire waiting for us. By the time the seventh of the first month has come and gone, even if someone can uncover his secret, the most he could do is to stare at him."

Gu Song: "Because by that time he is already the Cult Leader of the Western Region's Luochoa Cult."

Lu Xiaofeng: "By that time not only he is the Cult Leader of Luochoa Cult, but also the Clan Leader of the Black Tiger Clan. It's a pity ..."

Gu Song coldly said, "It's a pity right now he is not."

Lu Xiaofeng: "It's truly a pity."

Gu Song: "Right now he is no more than a turtle in a jar, a fish in the net."

Suddenly Blue Beard also sighed and said, "It's a pity, truly a pity."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What is it that you feel pity?"

Blue Beard: "It's a pity we are all blind."

Lu Xiaofeng: "We?"

Blue Beard: "What I mean by 'we', is you and me."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Me ...?"

Blue Beard: "Only blind men can make a mistake in choosing a friend."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I made a mistake in choosing a friend?"

Blue Beard: "A very grave mistake indeed."

Lu Xiaofeng: "And you?"

Blue Beard: "I am even more blind than you are, because not only I made a mistake in choosing a friend, I made a worse mistake in marrying a wife."

He had not finished speaking the word 'wife' when fast as lightning he made his move by grabbing the main artery on Fang Yuxiang's wrist and fiercely said, "Take it out!"

Fang Yuxiang's beautiful face turned grayish green from the fright as she said, "I don't know where the real Luocha Tablet is, what do you want me to take out?"

Blue Beard: "The one I want is not the Luocha Tablet, it's ..."

Fang Yuxiang: "What is it?"

Blue Beard did not reply, he did not even open his mouth, even his breathing seemed to have stopped, as if suddenly there were a pair of invisible hands gripped his throat tightly.

His usually calm and composed face was also suddenly twisted and turned into indescribably eerie bluish green.

Fang Yuxiang looked at him in shock, "You ... what do you want from me?"

Blue Beard's mouth was tightly closed, cold sweats dripped down like rain.

Fang Yuxiang's eyes suddenly filled with gentleness and compassion; in a tender voice she said, "I am your wife, whatever it is you want from me, I will give it to you, why do you have to be angry?"

Blue Beard only stared at her. Suddenly the corner of his eyes burst apart. Instantly blood started to flow from the corner of his eyes, the

corner of his mouth, his nostrils and his ears.

It was blood all right, but it was not scarlet.

Strangely, the color of his blood had also turned into an eerie bluish green.

He was not able to sit anymore and slowly fell backward.

Fang Yuxiang gently propped him up while prying his hand off. Fang Yufei also hastily helped him up.

"What happened? You ..."

They did not continue asking, because they knew a dead person would not be able to reply or say anything.

In one instant they saw the Blue Beard made his move like a lightning, in another instant he had turned into a dead man.

But it looked like his bulging eyes were still staring at Fang Yuxiang; a stare filled with grief and indignation, but also accusation.

Looking at him, Fang Yuxiang drew back step by step, with crystal clear tear drops flowed down on her face like a mountain spring.

"Why did you do this? Why did you do this?"

Her voice was unbearably sad. "Whatever it is, it is not unsolvable; why did bring your own destruction?"

The room was quiet save for her sorrowful wailing.

The rest of them had not recovered from this shock.

The Blue Beard was dead. This turn of events was truly more shocking than everything that had happened just a moment ago.

Strangely, Lu Xiaofeng was not shocked. Even the least bit of astonishment did not appear on his face.

The one with the most painful expression was Gu Song. In a low voice he mumbled, "The real Luocha Tablet must still be in his possession. He must have hidden it in a very secret location. He must be the only one knew this secret. But now he is dead ..."

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng said, "It doesn't matter whether he is dead or not."

Gu Song: "Doesn't matter?"

Lu Xiaofeng lightly said, "He is not the only one who knows his secret."

Gu Song: "Who else would know?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I do."

Gu Song sprang up suddenly, but slowly sat back down. His expression was back to normal as he slowly asked, "You know where he hid the Luochoa Tablet?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "He was such a shady and sly person. A sly person is usually over suspicious; therefore, the only one he would trust perhaps is himself."

Gu Song: "And so he must have kept the Luochoa Tablet on himself?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "He must have."

Gu Song sprang up again and was about to rush over.

But Lu Xiaofeng cut him off, "If you search him right now, I guarantee you won't find it."

Gu Song: "But you just said that the Luochoa Tablet must be on him?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Then was then, now is now; in just a short moment many things can change."

Gu Song: "And so the Luochoa Tablet was on him a moment ago, but now it is gone?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Definitely gone."

Gu Song: "Where is it now?"

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng turned toward Fang Yuxiang and slowly stretched out his hand in front of her, "Take it out."

Biting her lips, Fang Yuxiang bitterly said, "Even my husband's life has been taken by you, what else do you want from me?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "What he wanted a moment ago indeed was not the Luochoa Tablet, because at that time the Luochoa Tablet was still on him."

Fang Yuxiang: "Do you know what he wanted?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Yes, he wanted the antidote."

Fang Yuxiang: "Antidote?"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled while picking up the gold cup Blue Beard used to drink his last wine, "He had always been a very cautious person, it was truly not easy for anybody to poison him, but this time ..."

Fang Yuxiang: "Could it be that this time somebody poisoned him?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. "This time he was poisoned because he was so

sure that there was no poison in the wine, there was also no poison on the cup."

Fang Yuxiang: "If that's the case, then how did he get poisoned?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because he had forgotten something."

Fang Yuxiang: "What thing?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "He had forgotten that the gold cup was fetched by you, moreover, that you have wiped it with your silk handkerchief."

He looked at the handkerchief tucked into Fang Yuxiang's lapel and slowly added, "He forgot, although there was no poison in the wine, there was also no poison on the cup, your silk handkerchief is poisonous."

Fang Yuxiang was silent. Only after a long time did she softly say, "I just want to ask you something."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I am listening."

Fang Yuxiang: "I am asking you: people like Fei Tian Yu Hu, do they deserve to be killed?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "They do."

Fang Yuxiang: "In that case, even if I killed him, you should not blame

me."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I have never blamed you, I only want you to take it out."

Fang Yuxiang: "Take out what?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "The Luocho Tablet."

Fang Yuxiang: "The Luocho Tablet? Where would I get such Luocho Tablet from?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Indeed you did not have it, but now you do."

Fang Yuxiang: "What you want is ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Is the piece you groped from Blue Beard's body just a moment ago."

Fang Yuxiang fell silent again for a long time before she finally sighed softly and said, "Apparently Lu Xiaofeng truly deserves to be called Lu Xiaofeng, seems like nothing can be concealed from you."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled, "Although sometimes my eyes are blind, fortunately most of the time they are wide open."

Fang Yuxiang bit her lip, she looked at Lu Xiaofeng, and then looked at Sui Han San You, finally she stomped her feet and called out, "All right,

you want me to take it out, I'll take it out. This evil thing can only bring bad luck to people anyway."

She really took out something from her pocket, an amazingly crystal clear jade tablet. The beauty of this jade tablet indeed far exceeded the other two tablets.

The jade tablet had just fallen onto the table, like a floating cloud Gu Song's long sleeve flew out.

The jade tablet on the table immediately vanished into his sleeve.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled as he looked at him, "The mission accomplished, the tablet is returned, fortunately I do not bring disgrace to myself."

Gu Song: "Bygone enmity and old grievances have been wiped out herewith with this word 'accomplished'."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Thank you."

Gu Song: "Thank you."

With a wooden expression Fang Yuxiang coldly said, "Now Fei Tian Yu Hu is dead, the LuoCha Tablet has also been returned to you, what are you waiting for?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You want us to leave?"

Fang Yuxiang bit her lip, "What else do you want? Could it be that you want me?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "If you ask me, of course I want you, but there is a minor problem."

Fang Yuxiang: "What problem?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Are you really a human being?"

Fang Yuxiang laughed, Lu Xiaofeng also laughed.

He was laughing out loud while walking out. Suddenly he turned his head and patted Fang Yufei on the shoulder, "Chen Jingjing is a very smart girl. Since you like her, you should treat her well."

Fang Yufei: "Chen Jingjing? Which Chen Jingjing?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Of course the Chen Jingjing we both know."

Fang Yufei: "Then you should know that she died in the fire."

Lu Xiaofeng: "No, she did not."

Fang Yufei: "She did not?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "There was indeed a woman's body in the fire, but it was

not Chen Jingjing's."

Fang Yufei: "Oh?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Chen Jingjing was hit by Chuchu's three bone-penetrating needles, that woman's skeleton did not have even one needle. Before you burned her to death, would you still have time to extract the secret projectiles first?"

Fang Yufei chuckled, "I do not have that kind of ability."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Therefore, the woman died in the fire was not Chen Jingjing."

Fang Yufei was still laughing, but his laughter was somewhat forced. "If Chen Jingjing did not die, where did she go?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Since the stuffed steamed bun is still on the plate, the one you ate must be the plain steamed bun."

Fang Yufei: "Since Chen Jingjing did not die in the fire, someone must have carried Chen Jingjing away."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I told you, this logic is very simple."

Fang Yufei: "Do you also know who carried her away?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You."

Fang Yufei could not say another word.

Lu Xiaofeng: "At first I did not have any suspicions on this matter, but actually you should not kill that child."

Fang Yufei lowered his head, he looked at his own hands.

Lu Xiaofeng: "I'm sure you also knew that that child was an idiot, there is no way he would recognize your appearance, but you still did not want to take any risk and thus killed him to close his mouth, just because you were afraid he might tell me that the Auntie who was supposed to give him some candy did not die. Although he was stupid, he would certainly be able to tell this little fact."

Fang Yufei: "And you started to suspect me from then on?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "That's why I went back to the fire to take a look, and only then did I discover the woman's skeleton was not Chen Jingjing's."

Fang Yufei: "But you still could not prove that I was the one who carry Chen Jingjing away."

Lu Xiaofeng: "That's why I employed Zhao Junwu's help to find some information for me."

Fang Yufei: "What information?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Chen Jingjing was seriously injured, if you want to keep her alive, you would certainly find a doctor for her, and the number of doctors who are able to treat that kind of injury is truly not many."

Fang Yufei: "Within several hundred li around that place, perhaps there is only one."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Exactly one."

Fang Yufei: "Laohekou, Tongde hall, Feng family shop's Blind Feng number two."

Lu Xiaofeng: "The best part is: because he is a blind man, blind man cannot see the shape of the secret projectile."

Fang Yufei indifferently said, "Perhaps because of this fact that he is still alive."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Only it's too bad that Chen Jingjing was hit by a bone-penetrating needle from a unique school, a very rare type of secret projectile."

Fang Yufei: "Therefore, as soon as Zhao Junwu asked around, he found the information."

Lu Xiaofeng: "From this, it can be seen that Ding Xiangyi was killed by you, her lover is also you."

Fang Yufei: "Oh?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because the jade tablet I showed to her has fallen into your hands. Therefore, when a moment ago I mentioned the Blind Feng number two, you promptly took it out like an obedient child."

He chuckled, and then continued, "Actually, my incantation was completely useless to others, but to you, it was a threat."

Fang Yufei: "Saving others' life is not a disgraceful matter, why would I feel threatened by you?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because you are afraid someone might find out."

Fang Yufei: "I ... I am afraid who would find out?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, he turned his face toward Fang Yuxiang.

Fang Yuxiang's countenance had turned ashen.

Lu Xiaofeng patted Fang Yufei's shoulder again, and said with a smile, "I told you that Chen Jingjing is a very lovely girl, not only she is smart and pretty, she is also gentle and considerate toward others. Since you have taken the risk to save her, you should treat her well, don't you agree?"

Fang Yufei: "Right, absolutely right."

He smiled again, Lu Xiaofeng was also smiling, yet those two people's smile definitely did not have anything in common.

Thereupon Lu Xiaofeng walked out with a smile on his face.

"Wait!" Fang Yuxiang suddenly called out loudly.

Lu Xiaofeng stopped.

Fang Yuxiang: "You have also forgotten something."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

Fang Yuxiang: "You forgot you said you are going to give him something."

By 'him', she meant Fang Yufei.

Previously, when she looked at Fang Yufei, her eyes were always brimming with sweetness and affection, but now not even the least bit of a smile remained.

Now, there were only pain, jealousy, and hatred in her eyes, the kind of jealousy and hatred that almost reaches madness.

Word by word she continued, "You forgot to give him an a\$\$hole." [see

end of Chapter 4]

The wick of the lanterns was in need of trimming, resulted in the dimmed light.

The room became suddenly still, as still as the grave.

Fang Yufei stood motionless where he was; no emotion was shown on his face, but for some reason, his exceptionally handsome and attractive face somehow looked gloomy and unspeakably dreadful.

Even Fang Yuxiang did not dare to look at him anymore.

She turned toward Lu Xiaofeng and said, "I know you said you were going to give him one."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I did say that."

Fang Yuxiang: "Will you?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I will."

Fang Yuxiang suddenly burst out in laughter, a mad kind of laughter, she laughed so hard that tears flowed down her face.

She used the handkerchief tucked in her lapel to wipe her tears. "I would rather be blind than seeing you and that ***** together."

Her voice became raspy as she shouted loudly, while blood started to appear on the corners of her mouth.

She used the handkerchief to wipe the corners of her mouth.

"Actually, I should have known early on that you were only using me, but I have never thought that you would like that *****."

She started to cough. "All along you have hidden the truth from me, I suppose you were afraid I might leak your secret. As soon as our business is over, I will definitely die without a burial place, because in reality, I know your secret too much, too much ..."

She still wanted to continue, but her throat was closing down, as if suddenly there were a pair of invisible hands gripping tightly gripping her throat.

And then her pretty face started to twist, blood also started to flow out from her orifices.

But the blood was not scarlet, but eerie bluish green. When she fell down, she happened to fall onto the Blue Beard's body.

Fang Yufei saw her falling, he was still not moving, his face was devoid of any emotion.

Lu Xiaofeng could not refrain from heaving a sigh and mutter, "There

are things I did not want to say, too bad ..."

Fang Yufei suddenly cut him off, "Too bad you have suspected me a long time ago."

Lu Xiaofeng nodded, "You are the real Fei Tian Yu Hu, the Blue Beard was nothing more than a puppet you exploited."

Fang Yufei: "You also knew early on that she was not my Meimei."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Chuchu, Jingjing, Xiangyi, they all grew up with her, but they have never mentioned she had any Gege!"

Fang Yufei: "You are very attentive."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Whenever Fei Tian Yu Hu appeared, you were always nearby, but the Blue Beard had never left this place."

Fang Yufei did not deny.

Lu Xiaofeng: "You knew the Luocha Tablet was in Blue Beard's possession, so you told Chen Jingjing to incite Li Xia to steal it. Using Fang Yuxiang as bait, you trapped me, and then you led Li Xia to deal with Jia Leshan. Finally you wanted to use the Blue Beard as your scapegoat. In the end, naturally their riches would belong to you."

Fang Yufei indifferently said, "You should have known that my expenses are always very big, I have to support many women, all women know how

to spend money, especially women who are both beautiful and smart."

Lu Xiaofeng: "These women, no doubt they all are very intelligent, but actually, in your eyes, they are ..."

Fang Yufei: "They are no more than a bunch of b**ches."

Lu Xiaofeng: "No matter what, your being able to use these many women, your ability is truly not small, it's a pity ..."

Fang Yufei cut him off again, "It's a pity that in the end it was a woman who brought me harm."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Actually, the one bringing harm to you is not Fang Yuxiang."

Fang Yufei: "If not her, then who?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Chen Jingjing."

Fang Yufei: "She ..."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Only she can bring you harm, because only to her you were being sincere. If not because of her, how could you reveal that many secrets?"

Fang Yufei closed his mouth. Although his face was still devoid of any

emotion, he was clearly struggling hard to control himself.

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because you still have this little bit of sincerity, I am going to give you an opportunity."

Fang Yufei: "What opportunity?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Toward a man like you, actually we do not need to speak about righteousness and justice of the Jianghu. There are four of us in here, if we make our move together, no doubt you will die in the blink of an eye."

Fang Yufei did not deny.

Lu Xiaofeng: "But now I am willing to give you the opportunity to have a fair duel."

Fang Yufei: "You and me?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "That's right, you and me, mano a mano."

Fang Yufei: "If I win?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "If you can defeat me, I am dead, you are free to go."

Fang Yufei turned his gaze toward Sui Han San You.

Gu Song coldly said, "If you can defeat him, he is dead, you are free to go."

Fang Yufei: "You say it and mean it?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Definitely I won't renege on my words!"

Suddenly Fang Yufei laughed and said, "I know why you want to do it this way."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

Fang Yufei: "Because you want to kill me with your own hands."

Lu Xiaofeng did not deny.

Fang Yufei smiled and said, "But you are wrong!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I have often done wrong things, luckily once in a while I can also do the right thing."

Fang Yufei: "But this time you are wrong, very wrong!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

Fang Yufei: "You will not defeat me, once you make your move, you will no doubt die."

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed.

Fang Yufei: "I clearly understand your martial art skills, your magical finger is completely useless against me, but I have a special strategy to deal with you."

Lu Xiaofeng only smiled as he listened to him.

Suddenly Fang Yufei turned his body around, and when he turned back, his hands were covered by a pair of silvery and glittering gloves. Not only the gloves were covered with needle sharp thorns, the fingers were equipped with tiger claw hooks.

Fang Yufei: "I developed this especially to deal with you. Your finger only needs to make one contact with this, in less than three steps, you will definitely fall down and die."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "Can I not touch it?"

Fang Yufei: "You can't."

He continued slowly, "Clamping down the opponent's weapon with your fingers has always been your usual practice. A usual practice of many years will not change in just a short moment, especially in the face of a danger. And I guarantee you will face a lot of danger."

Lu Xiaofeng looked at his silvery gloves; in the end he sighed and with a

bitter smile he said, "Looks like my death has been decided."

Fang Yufei: "I have no doubt. You will definitely die."

His voice and manner were full of confidence. When martial art masters were having a duel, confidence was actually a very formidable weapon, even more formidable than his pair of fantastic silver gloves.

The smiling expression on Lu Xiaofeng had disappeared.

At this moment, Fang Yufei already struck.

Chapter 11 – A Bunch of Ugly Condemns

The light flickered, dazzling Lu Xiaofeng's eyes. Strange and crafty style, each stance spelled death.

The room was not too wide to begin with, Lu Xiaofeng practically did not have any room to retreat.

In this world, there are people who had never suffered any defeat.

Lu Xiaofeng was that kind of person. Could it be that today he will suffer defeat in here?

With his hands behind his back, Gu Song was standing on the farthest corner, coldly watching the battle. Suddenly he asked, "Do you think he will be defeated?"

Ku Zhu mumbled intelligibly, then said, "What do you think?"

Gu Song: "I think he will be defeated. No doubt."

Ku Zhu sighed and said, "I never thought there will come a day Lu Xiaofeng will be defeated."

Gu Song: "I was not talking about Lu Xiaofeng."

Ku Zhu was surprised, "No?"

Gu Song: "I said Fang Yufei will be defeated."

Ku Zhu: "But right now he seems to be occupying the upper hand position."

Gu Song: "Occupying the upper hand position early in the battle only wasting one's strength; in the battle between masters, the key to victory or defeat lies in the very last strike."

Ku Zhu: "But right now Lu Xiaofeng already seems unable to defend himself."

Gu Song: "It's not that he is unable, he is only unwilling."

Ku Zhu: "Why?"

Gu Song: "He is waiting."

Ku Zhu: "Waiting for the very last opportunity, to make the very last strike?"

Gu Song: "Too much talk leads to error; by occupying the upper hand position, by rushing to the offensive early, sooner or later one will make a wrong move."

Ku Zhu: "And that's when Lu Xiaofeng will get the opportunity to strike?"

Gu Song: "That's right."

Ku Zhu: "Even if there is such opportunity, it will surely like a white steed flits past a crack, an opportunity that will disappear in a flash."

Gu Song: "Naturally."

Ku Zhu: "And you think he will not miss it?"

Gu Song: "I believe that if he wanted to make a move, one strike is all he need."

All this time Han Mei was quietly listening on the side, but his eyes seemed to have that kind of mocking or ridiculing laugh. Suddenly, with a cold laugh he said, "Too bad there's always time when somebody will miscalculate."

When he started talking, Fang Yufei had just managed to push Lu Xiaofeng toward the corner they were standing.

Nobody could describe the speed with which he drew his sword, nobody could see clearly his movement when he drew his sword, all they could see was the flashing of the sword!

The flashing of the sword as fast as the lightning went straight toward Lu Xiaofeng's back.

It was definitely a fatal strike!

Lu Xiaofeng was hounded to death by the attack from the front, perhaps not even in his dream he would ever imagined that the fatal strike would come from behind instead.

How could he evade?

He could!

Just because he was Lu Xiaofeng.

There were sixty split seconds in one snap of the fingers; the crucial point to decide life and death is no more than one split second. In that split second he suddenly twisted his body, just as if his body suddenly shrank.

Like a flying arrow the sword by, once released, it could not be pulled back.

The sword's ray penetrated his clothes, but did not penetrate his back. Instead, the sword's ray went straight toward Fang Yufei who was directly in front of him.

Fang Yufei clapped his palms to clamp the blade of the sword.

He also did not have anywhere to evade the sword, it was merely a last minute desperate move to save his own life.

Too bad he forgot that his opponent was not Han Mei, but Lu Xiaofeng.

And Lu Xiaofeng was right by his side.

Almost in that same split second, Lu Xiaofeng had made his move.

Nobody could describe the speed of this strike, nobody could see clearly his movement, but they could see a bloody hole appeared in the middle of Fang Yufei's chest.

They could see very clearly, because fresh blood was starting to flow out from his chest.

His body slowly turned icy-cold and stiff, yet he had not fallen down, because there was a sword sticking into his chest.

Han Mei's sword.

It was truly a fatal strike, but it was not Lu Xiaofeng's world-famous finger, rather, it was this sword.

When Lu Xiaofeng's finger struck in between his eyebrows, his hands, which were clamping the blade of the sword, loosened; the sword, which still carried a residue of the thrusting force, pierced his chest.

Han Mei's body also seemed to stiffen and turned icy-cold -- there is always time when somebody will miscalculate, but this time it was he

who miscalculated.

The outcome of this affair was truly beyond anybody's expectation.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at the hole in between Fang Yufei's eyebrows and slowly said, "I said I would give you one, and definitely I must deliver."

Fang Yufei looked at him with an empty eyes; his hawk-like sharp gaze had already turned empty grey. The corners of his mouth suddenly twitched into a mocking smile as he struggled to say, "Originally, I have always envied you very much."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

Fang Yufei: "Because you have four eyebrows."

He gasped for breath, but struggled hard to continued, "But you cannot compete with me now, because I have two a\$\$holes. I guarantee that you will never surpass me in this regard."

Lu Xiaofeng did not open his mouth, in fact, he was unable to open his mouth.

Fang Yufei looked at him. Suddenly he laughed; he laughed hard as he drew back. The sword came out of his chest, blood splashed out.

His laughter stopped instantly.

When he stopped breathing, blood was still dripping from the sword in Han Mei's hand.

Han Mei's face was ashen.

It was as if the blood dripping from the tip of his sword was not only Fang Yufei's, but also his own.

He did not dare to look up, he did not dare to face Ku Zhu and Gu Song; but they were staring at him.

Suddenly Gu Song sighed and said, "You were right, there's always time when somebody will misread something; I have misread you."

Ku Zhu also sighed and said, "How could you work hand in glove with this man? How could you do this kind of matter?"

Suddenly Han Mei shouted, "Because I don't want to be bullied by you for the rest of my life!"

Ku Zhu: "But you are willing to be bullied by Fang Yufei?"

With a cold laugh Han Mei said, "If we succeeded, I would become the Cult Leader of the Luocha Cult. Fang Yufei would rule inside the Great Wall, I would control the outside. The Luocha Cult joins hand with the Black Tiger Hall, no doubt we would be unchallenged under the heavens."

Ku Zhu: "Have you forgotten your age? We have lived in seclusion on Kunlun Mountains for twenty years, have you not whittled away the greed in your heart?"

Han Mei: "It is exactly because I am old, exactly because I have wasted several dozen years of tedious days, that while I am still alive, I wanted to do something earth-shattering."

Gu Song coldly said, "It's a pity that you did not succeed."

With a cold laugh Han Mei replied, "I don't care if I succeed or I fail. Either way, I will never be bullied by you."

A dead man will never be bullied by anybody.

Night. The dark long lane, the dismal and frigid fog.

Lu Xiaofeng slowly stepped out into the dark. Gu Song and Ku Zhu slowly walked by his side. The sparse stars were sinking.

Their moods were sinking even lower -- sometimes a success cannot take the place of a true happiness.

But at least success is a lot better than failure.

Beyond this long lane, the outside world was still covered in darkness.

Suddenly Gu Song asked, "Have you anticipated the sword from your back?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded.

Gu Song: "So you figured out early on that he was in cahoots with Fang Yufei?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded again, he said, "Because they have made a mistake."

Gu Song: "Tell us."

Lu Xiaofeng: "That day, Han Mei shouldn't have forced me to fight Zhao Junwu; seemed to me he was simply trying to buy Fang Yufei some time."

"Humph," Gu Song snorted.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "When one's secret is exposed, when one is at the end of the line, one would not have the confidence Fang Yufei had just displayed, unless he had another way out."

Gu Song: "That's why you deliberately put yourself in dire situation first; that was also not a good thing."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Everybody needs to have self-confidence, but too much confidence in oneself is also not a good thing."

Gu Song: "It was because he was so confident that you were going to die that you did not die."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "Oftentimes, it was when one is closest to success that one would be most negligent."

Gu Song: "Because he thought success was already knocking on his door, his guard was down and his arrogance rose up."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Therefore, the number of people who really achieved success is indeed not too many."

Gu Song was silent for quite a long time before he suddenly asked, "There is one more thing that I do not understand."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Tell me."

Gu Song: "You really have never seen the real Luocha Tablet?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I haven't."

Gu Song: "But with one glance you were able to tell whether it was genuine or fake?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because it was the Big Boss Zhu's craftsmanship. Big Boss Zhu is my friend, I know his special characteristic."

Gu Song: "What special characteristic?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "When he produces a replica, he always leaves a distinguishing mark, he intentionally wants people to find it."

Gu Song: "What kind of distinguishing mark?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "For example, when he copied the Han Gan horse, oftentimes he would deliberately paint a little worm on the horse's mane."

Gu Song: "When he copied the Luocha Tablet, what distinguishing mark did he leave?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "The back of the Luocha Tablet is engraved with images of various deities and various demons, among which was a flower-scattering fairy [orig. 'tian nu' - female heavenly being, celestial woman]."

Gu Song: "That's right."

Lu Xiaofeng: "With just one glance I was able to recognize the face of that flower-scattering fairy."

Gu Song: "How come?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because that was the Lady Boss' face."

Gu Song: "Lady Boss?"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled, "The Lady Boss is of course the Boss Zhu's wife."

Gu Song's face looked ashen, with a cold voice he said, "Therefore, you must have also seen that the Luocha Tablet Fang Yuxiang took from the Blue Beard's bosom is also a fake article."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "Actually, I did not want to look, but I could not bear not to give it a glance; therefore ..."

Gu Song: "Therefore what?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Therefore, very soon I will have a bad luck."

Gu Song: "Bad luck? What bad luck?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Han Mei's kind of bad luck."

Gu Song's countenance fell.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "Han Mei did all that because he was unwilling to acquiesce to old age, unwilling to be lonely, but what about you?"

Gu Song closed his mouth, he was unwilling to answer.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "If the two of you are really that kind of hermits who are without care of the world and live a simple life, why would you join

the Luocho Cult? If you do not harbor the desire to be the Luocho Cult's Jiaozhu, why would you kill Yu Tianbao?"

Ku Zhu's countenance also changed greatly, "What did you say?" he sternly asked.

Lu Xiaofeng matter-of-factly said, "I am simply stating a simple logic."

Ku Zhu: "What logic?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "If you are truly loyal and devoted to the Luocho Cult, why didn't you kill me to avenge the son of your Jiaozhu?"

He chuckled and then answered his own question, "Because you know that Yu Tianbao did not die in my hands. I have never even seen him. Who actually killed him, in your hearts you certainly know how things stand."

Ku Zhu coldly said, "If you are a really smart person, you should not have said these things."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I said these things, only because I know a simpler logic."

Ku Zhu: "What logic?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "It doesn't matter whether I said these things or not, I will still fall into the bad luck."

Ku Zhu: "Why?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because I have seen the Luocha Tablet, because in this world I am the only one who knows that Luocha Tablet is a fake. If you intent to use that Luocha Tablet to ascend the Jiaozhu's throne of the Luocha Cult, you have no choice but to kill me to close my mouth."

He sighed, then added, "Right now there is nobody else around here; this is precisely the best opportunity for you to make your move. Song Zhu Shen Jian [Divine Sword of Pine and Bamboo; Gu Song and Ku Zhu's name mean 'lone pine' and 'dry bamboo', respectively], combined double sword to form a wall, I am definitely not your match."

Gu Song looked at him with cold eyes; suddenly he said, "You gave Fang Yufei a chance, I can also give you a chance."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What chance?"

Gu Song: "I'll let you run right now, as long as you can escape from us this time, definitely we will no longer look for you in the future."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I cannot escape."

Although Gu Song and Ku Zhu seemed to be standing casually, the position they occupied was actually very ingenious; they were like a pair of pliers, ready to pinch Lu Xiaofeng in the middle.

Although right now the pliers had not clamped down, they were already like a fully-taut bows, ready to spring into action. Perhaps no one

under the heavens would be able to escape from the clamping of these pliers.

Lu Xiaofeng was able to see this fact very clearly, yet his laughter was still very cheerful, "I know that I won't be able to escape from you, but there is one thing that you do not know."

Gu Song: "Oh?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Even if I am able to escape, I will not run away. Even if you cannot catch up with me, I will still not run away."

Gu Song: "You want to die?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I don't want it even more."

Gu Song did not understand, Ku Zhu did not understand even more. The way Lu Xiaofeng dealt with his problem, less than several people in the world would understand.

Lu Xiaofeng: "In the last six years, I should have died at least sixty times, but until now I am still alive and well. Do you know why?"

Gu Song: "Tell us."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because I have friends. I have a lot of friends. Among those friends, fortunately there are one or two who know how to use sword."

As the word 'sword' came out of his mouth, Gu Song suddenly felt an intense and cold sword aura on his back.

He turned around quickly, but did not see any sword. He only saw a man!

The intense and cold sword aura was actually coming from this man; this man's body seemed to be even sharper than the sword.

It was foggy. The fog was gradually getting thicker.

This man was standing in the hazy fog, in the middle of the icy-cold thick fog, as if he was coming from a distant past to stand in there, or perhaps he had just appeared from nowhere into the thick fog.

Although this man was sharper than the sword, yet just like the fog, he also looked empty and blurred, faintly indiscernible like an imaginary shadow.

Gu Song and Ku Zhu could not see his face, but they could see this man was wearing white clothes, as white as snow.

Peerless sword of the present age. Although there was no sword in his hand, although the sword had not left its sheathe, only his presence carried a sword aura that was nearer and more threatening than a sword.

The pupil of Gu Song and Ku Zhu's eyes shrank. "Ximen Chuixue!"

They had not seen this man's face, in fact, they had never seen Ximen Chuixue before, yet in that instant they were already aware that this man must be Ximen Chuixue!

Unique and unmatched sword under the heavens.

Unique and unmatched under the heavens, Ximen Chuixue!

Ximen Chuixue had not moved, had not opened his mouth, had not pulled his sword, as a matter of fact, he did not even have any sword in him!

Lu Xiaofeng smiled again.

Gu Song could not bear not to ask, "When did you call him to come?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I didn't call him, but fortunately among my friends, there are one or two who would call him for me."

Gu Song: "Finally you find the right man."

Ku Zhu coldly said, "It has always been our wish to see the 'bright moon night, indigo sky, one sword breaking the flying immortal' Ximen Chuixue."

Lu Xiaofeng: "That's why although I did not call him to come, you would also go to look for him."

Ku Zhu laughed coldly.

Ximen Chuixue suddenly said, "You are wrong."

Ku Zhu: "What's wrong?"

Ximen Chuixue: "The swordsmanship of the Master of the White Cloud Castle was just like white cloud in the clear sky, faultless and pure. Nobody can break his 'flying immortal of the outer sky'."

Ku Zhu: "You cannot either?"

Ximen Chuixue: "I cannot."

Ku Zhu: "But you did."

Ximen Chuixue: "The one who broke that 'flying immortal of the outer sky' was not me."

Ku Zhu: "If it was not you, who was it?"

Ximen Chuixue: "He himself."

Ku Zhu did not understand, Gu Song also did not understand. The way Ximen Chuixue spoke, less than several people in the world would understand.

Ximen Chuixue: "Although his swordsmanship was pure, his heart was not."

His eyes shone as he slowly continued, "The essence of the sword power lies in the 'sincere heart and upright mind'; when one's heart is filthy, how can he not be defeated?"

Ku Zhu suddenly felt a gust of sword aura rushed in. These words were sharper than the sword.

Wasn't it because his own heart was not pure?

Ximen Chuixue said, "If the heart is not pure, the sword will definitely weak ..."

Eventually, Ku Zhu could not bear not to interrupt him. "Where is your sword?" he asked in stern voice.

Ximen Chuixue: "I have it."

Ku Zhu: "Where?"

Ximen Chuixue: "Everywhere!"

It was also a hard-to-understand word, but Ku Zhu understood it, Gu Song also understood it well -- if his being and his sword had been dissolved into one entity, his body was the sword; as long his being

existed, all objects under the heavens was his sword -- it was precisely the highest and most profound realm of swordsmanship.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled and said, "It seems to me that after your duel with Ye Gucheng, your swordsmanship has advanced one more level."

Ximen Chuixue was silent for a long time before finally he slowly said, "There is still one thing you do not understand."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

Ximen Chuixue's shining eyes suddenly became like the fog, empty, blurry, and melancholy, "With a sword I defeated the Master of the White Cloud Castle. All over the world, who is worthy to accompany me using that sword again?"

Ku Zhu coldly said, "I ..."

Ximen Chuixue did not let him continue, he coldly said, "You are even not worthy, if you must depend on the collaboration of a pair of swords to defeat the enemy and achieve victory, this kind of swordsmanship is only fit to trim the flowers and cut the cloth."

Suddenly there was a ringing noise, the sword had left its sheathe.

Ku Zhu's sword!

The sword ray split the air, it flew ten zhang away.

Although the mighty power of this sword was incomparable to the 'flying immortal of the outer sky', it stood out above the lone steep hill, just like the ten-thousand years old dry bamboo resisting the cold wind on the mountain peak.

Ximen Chuixue still had not moved, had not drawn his sword.

There was no sword in his hand, where was his sword?

Suddenly, there was another clear ringing sound, the sword ray dispersed, the shadows of the two men came together, but suddenly separated again.

The fog was getting thicker, getting colder.

The two men stood facing each other, the tip of Ku Zhu's sword was dripping with blood ...

His own sword, his own blood.

But the sword was no longer in his hand, this sword pierced his heart from the front, and went through his body to appear on his back.

He looked at Ximen Chuixue in shock, as if he did not believe this really happened.

Ximen Chuixue coldly said, "I believe you should know by now where

my sword is?"

Ku Zhu wanted to speak, but he could only cough.

Ximen Chuixue coldly said, "My sword was in your hand, your sword is mine."

Ku Zhu roared wildly and pulled the sword out.

As soon as the blade came out of his chest, blood spurted out like flying arrow.

Ximen Chuixue still had not moved.

The blood splashed in front of him, falling down like rain, the tip of the sword also went straight to him, and then drooped down to the ground.

When Ku Zhu fell down, he did not even give him a glance.

He was looking at Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng could not refrain from heaving a sigh, but Gu Song actually was holding his breath.

Ximen Chuixue said, "You sent people to get me, and here I am!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I know you would certainly come."

Ximen Chuixue: "Because I owe you one."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because you are my friend."

Ximen Chuixue: "Even though we are friends, this is the last time I am helping you."

Lu Xiaofeng: "The last time?"

Ximen Chuixue coldly said, "I have paid my debt of gratitude, I do not owe you anything anymore, I also do not wish you to owe me anything, therefore ..."

With a bitter smile Lu Xiaofeng continued, "Therefore, if next time you see me about to die under someone else's hand, you will not do anything anymore."

Ximen Chuixue only looked at him with his cold gaze; he did not deny at all.

And then suddenly he disappeared, disappeared into the wind, disappeared into the fog; just like the way he appeared, so mysterious and unexpected.

Gu Song did not move, he did not move for a very, very long time, as if he had suddenly turned into an ancient pine tree. [Reminder: 'Song' means pine tree.]

The cold fog filled the air, so dense that eventually Ku Zhu's body, which lay about ten zhang away, was no longer visible, let alone Ximen Chuixue, whose shadow had disappeared for a long time.

Gu Song heaved a very deep sigh, he suddenly said, "That man is not human, he is definitely not a human."

Although Lu Xiaofeng did not deny, he did not acknowledge either – if one's swordsmanship has reached the divine level, won't that mean the person has also reached divinity? His body is his sword, his sword is his god!

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes suddenly showed an indescribable emotion, perhaps it was sympathy and sadness.

Unexpectedly Gu Song looked at him, with a cold voice he asked, "You have sympathy for him?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "My sympathy is not toward him."

Gu Song: "It is not?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "He is married and they have a child, originally I thought he would change into a real human."

Gu Song: "But he hasn't changed."

Lu Xiaofeng: "No, he hasn't."

Gu Song: "Sword is eternally unchanging, if he is the sword, how could he change?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed dejectedly – sword is eternally unchanging, sword will always hurt people.

Gu Song: "If a woman becomes the wife of a sword, naturally her life will not be pleasant."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Naturally."

Gu Song: "Therefore, your sympathy is toward his wife."

Lu Xiaofeng could not refrain from sighing again.

Gu Song stared at him, then he slowly said, "There must be a lot of sad events in the past among you. It is very possible that his wife was yours. The past events are unbearable to recall, you ..."

When the word 'you' came out of his mouth, his sword had already moved.

The sword flashed like a lightning, straight toward Lu Xiaofeng's throat!

The throat is the most fatal point in a human's body, and right now Lu

Xiaofeng was at the most frail state of mind.

The unbearable-to-recall past events, why do they always make one become sorrowful and weak?

Gu Song had chosen the best chance to strike!

His sword was faster than Ku Zhu's, the distance between Lu Xiaofeng and him was no more than an arm length.

This sword move was undoubtedly a fatal strike, he made his move with complete confidence.

Too bad he had forgotten one small detail – his opponent was not anybody else, but it was Lu Xiaofeng!

The sword stabbed, a cold ray flashed.

Right at this same split second, Lu Xiaofeng also made his move – he only extended his two fingers and pinched lightly!

No one can describe the speed and the magical characteristic of this pinch; the power displayed by this pinch was almost beyond the limit of human being's potential.

The cold ray vanished, the sword also blocked, he suddenly found that the blade of the sword was clamped between Lu Xiaofeng's two fingers.

Gu Song pulled the sword, he pulled again!

The sword would not budge!

Gu Song's entire body trembled in fear. Suddenly he let his sword go and leaped high into the sky he jumped five zhang away.

The speed and power with which he ran away was also beyond anybody's imagination, because he knew it was a matter of life and death to him.

The power a human being is capable of exerting in order to save his own life oftentimes is difficult for others to fathom.

Lu Xiaofeng did not pursue.

Because right this moment he suddenly felt a shadow appeared in the midst of the thick fog ahead.

A hazy shadow of a man, seemingly more blurry than the fog, seemingly more illusory than the fog, even more unfathomable than the fog.

Even if you saw him appear with your own eyes, you would feel it is difficult to believe that he really did appear from the earth. Even if you knew very well that he is not a ghost, you would also find it difficult to believe that he was a real human being.

Gu Song's elegant posture as he soared like a dragon in the sky suddenly halted and he dropped straight down to the ground, as if in that split second his mighty power suddenly crumbled and completely vanished.

Because he also saw this man, the man who appeared human but not quite a human, who appeared ghost yet not quite one.

'Bang!' This man, whose qinggong was peerless among the Wulin masters, unexpectedly dropped down to the ground, just like a piece of rock, and no longer moving.

It appeared that not only his strength suddenly crumbled and vanished completely, but even his life had completely gone.

Could it be that this sudden collapse only because he had seen this man?

Could it be that this man's body emit a power which will make others collapse and die? Could it be that he was the death?

The fog had not dispersed, the man had not walked away.

The man in the fog seemed to look at Lu Xiaofeng from the distant, Lu Xiaofeng was also looking at him, he could even see his eyes.

No one can describe that kind of eyes.

Obviously his eyes were located horizontally across his face, but his face seemed to be dissolved in the fog. Obviously his eyes were shining, but even this kind of shine seemed to blur into the fog and became indiscernible.

Although Lu Xiaofeng was looking at his eyes, he seemed to feel that probably he was just looking at the fog.

The man in the fog suddenly said, "Lu Xiaofeng?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "You know me?"

The man in the fog: "Not only I know you, I am also grateful to you."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Grateful?"

The man in the fog: "Grateful over two different matters."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Oh?"

The man in the fog: "Grateful because you helped me removing the scum in my own school and the enemy outside, also grateful because you are not my enemy."

Lu Xiaofeng took a very deep breath and said, "You are ..."

The man in the fog: "I am surnamed Yu [jade]."

Lu Xiaofeng slowly exhaled before saying, "Yu? Yu as in 'precious jade'?"

The man in the fog: "Precious jade without a mind of its own, precious jade is undefeatable."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Undefeatable means did not die?"

The man in the fog: "The Jade of the Western Region, as everlasting as the Heaven and the Earth."

Lu Xiaofeng exhaled again, "You are the Western Region's Yu Luochoa?"

The man in the fog: "I am."

The fog was hazy grey, he was also hazy grey; standing in the midst of the fog, he looked similarly blurry, similarly vague as his surrounding.

Was he really a human being? Or was he a ghost?

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly laughed, he laughed while shaking his head, "Actually, I should've thought of it early on."

The Western Region's Yu Luochoa asked, "Think of what?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I should've thought early on that your death was only a trick."

Yu Luochoa: "Why would I use such trick?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Because you personally founded the Western Region's Luochoa Cult, of course you would hope that it will be as everlasting as the Heaven and the Earth."

Yu Luochoa admitted.

Lu Xiaofeng: "But the organization of Western Region's Luochoa Cult is simply too big, the elements inside are simply too complex. When you are still alive, nobody dare to challenge your authority, but when you are dead, would these people continue to show the same devotion and loyalty to your descendants?"

Yu Luochoa said matter-of-factly, "Even the most pure gold unavoidably will not reach 100% purity, much less people."

Lu Xiaofeng: "You must have known early on that among your people, there are some people who are not loyal to you. You will want your offspring to retain this share of your family estate, so you wanted to find these people first."

Yu Luochoa: "When you are about to cook rice, don't you also pick the grains of [稗 - *Echinochloa crusgalli*] from among the grains of rice first?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "But you also knew that this is not going to be an easy task, some grains of barnyard millet are white; mixed among the grains of rice, they are very difficult to distinguish. Only when they have nothing to

fear from you will they appear in their true colors."

Yu Luochoa: "Only when I died, otherwise, they would never dare!"

Lu Xiaofeng: "It's a pity that desiring your death is really not easy; therefore, you resorted to this trick of feigning death."

Yu Luochoa: "This is one of the very ancient schemes, but it survives until today, is precisely because it is still effective."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled and said, "Now it appears your scheme is a total success, you must be very happy, are you not?"

Although he was smiling, his voice seemed to carry a hint of unspeakable mocking tone.

Naturally Yu Luochoa was able to catch this mocking tone, he asked back immediately, "Why must I not be happy?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Although you have saved enough water for your descendants to preserve the world, the family estate which will not be defeated for all ages, but what about your son?"

Suddenly Yu Luochoa laughed. His laughter was just like his personality, gloomy and faintly indiscernible; his laughter seemed to also brimming with an unspeakable mocking tone.

Lu Xiaofeng did not understand why he was still able to laugh.

Yu Luochoa was still laughing; he laughed when he said, "If you think the one who died under their hands was my real son, you underestimate me too much."

Lu Xiaofeng: "So the one who died under their hands was not really Yu Tianbao?"

Yu Luochoa: "It was Yu Tianbao all right, but Yu Tianbao was not my son."

Lu Xiaofeng: "They have been with you for many years, could it be that they did not even know who your son is?"

Yu Luochoa lightly said, "The day my son was born, he is not my son anymore."

Lu Xiaofeng did not understand even more.

Yu Luochoa: "I know it is hard for you to understand, because you are not the Cult Leader of the Western Region's Luochoa Cult."

Lu Xiaofeng: "And if I were?"

Yu Luochoa: "If you are, then you would know that when one reaches this kind of position, one would have absolutely no time to teach one's own son, because the matters you have to attend is simply too much."

His voice suddenly became somewhat melancholy, "The woman who

gave birth to my son, she died of childbirth on the same day. If a child, who is to become the future Jiaozhu of the Western Region's Luocho Cult, does not have his parents' admonition for all his life, what kind of man do you think he would grow into?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "Certainly a man like Yu Tianbao."

Yu Luocho: "Naturally you do not want someone like that to inherit the organization you founded."

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head again, and he sighed again.

Suddenly he realized that being the Cult Leader of the Western Region's Luocho Cult was indeed not easy, raising his own child to become a responsible adult was truly not easy.

Yu Luocho continued, "Therefore, by the seventh day after he was born, I handed him over to my most trusted man to be raised. Also on that same day, I adopted other people's child to be my own. Nobody knows this secret until today."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Why do you tell it to me now?"

Yu Luocho: "Because I trust you."

Lu Xiaofeng: "But we are not friends at all."

Yu Luocho: "Exactly because we are neither friends nor foes that I trust

you.”

His eyes were gleaming with that kind of mocking laugh again, “If you were the Cult Leader of the Western Region’s Luocha Cult, you would understand my meaning.”

Lu Xiaofeng understood.

Sometimes, some friends are more terrifying than foes.

It’s just that although he had also experience that kind of bitter friendship, he had never lost confidence in his friends.

Because he was not the Cult Leader of Western Region’s Luocha Cult.

He did not want to be, he had also never wanted to be a Cult Leader of any Cult. Supposed some people come to him and bring him up in a sedan chair, he would definitely not go.

Lu Xiaofeng was Lu Xiaofeng.

Yu Luocha’s gaze seemed to penetrate the dense fog and see through his heart. He suddenly laughed again and said, “Although you are not the Western Region’s Luocha Cult Jiaozhu, I know that you understand me very well. Likewise, although I am not Lu Xiaofeng, I can understand you very well.”

Whether he wanted to or not, Lu Xiaofeng could not deny this fact.

Although he was still unable to see this man's face clearly, but between them, without a doubt there was already an understanding and respect, which other people would find it hard to understand.

One kind of mutual respect.

He knew that Yu Luochoa was very thorough in his thought and very profound in his vision, which he himself would never be able to achieve.

Again, Yu Luochoa seemed to touch his feeling, he continued slowly, "I am grateful you are not my enemy, because I have just discovered a very terrifying matter."

Lu Xiaofeng: "What is it?"

Yu Luochoa: "You are the most terrifying person I have ever met in all my life. The things that you can do, many of those I would never be able to achieve. Therefore, I come here this time, originally I wanted to kill you."

Lu Xiaofeng: "But now?"

Yu Luochoa: "But now I only want to ask you one thing."

Lu Xiaofeng: "Go ahead."

Yu Luochoa: "Right now we are neither friends nor foe, but what about later?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I hope it will always be like this."

Yu Luochoa: "You really hope so?"

Lu Xiaofeng: "I do."

Yu Luochoa: "But maintaining this kind of relation is really not easy."

Lu Xiaofeng: "I know."

Yu Luochoa: "You won't regret it?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "I also wish you would understand one thing."

Yu Luochoa: "Tell me."

Lu Xiaofeng: "In all my life, I have met a lot of terrifying people, but no one is more terrifying than you!"

Yu Luochoa laughed. When he started to laugh, he was still standing in the midst of the fog, but by the time Lu Xiaofeng heard his laughter, he had already disappeared.

In this kind of hazy dense fog, meeting such a person as blurry as the fog, and then seeing that person faded away just like in a dream.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt that even he himself seemed to be lost in the fog.

After all is said and done, did he achieve success in this matter? Or did he fail? Even he was not able to tell clearly ...

Lu Xiaofeng Book 5: Mansion of Spirits (幽灵山庄)

Written by Gu Long

Translated by Junny, Ren Wo Xing and Foxs

Chapter 1 - Lu Xiaofeng on the run

Translated by Junny

Underneath the shiny antique bronze paperweights rested twelve white paper cards, around the elegant Eight Immortals Table sat seven people.

Seven people whose reputations and fame shook through the martial arts world.

Ancient Pine Hermit, Wooden Taoist, Monk Bittergourd, Second Master Tang, Swordsman Xiaoxiang, Sikong Zhaixing, Hua Manlou.

These seven people had unusual statuses and distinctive backgrounds; among them were monks, hermits, wandering swordsmen, highly-skilled imperial guards, disciples of esteemed sects, and elders of the martial arts world who had seen it all.

They had gathered here because they shared something in common.

They were Lu Xiaofeng's friends.

Now they had something else in common – all seven had grave expressions and heavy hearts.

Especially the Wooden Taoist.

Every one was watching him, waiting for him to speak.

They had all come here at his bidding; this was no simple matter, and of course he had the most important of reasons.

There were food and wine on the table, but nobody had lifted their cups or touched their food.

A breeze was blowing and the pavilion was filled with the fragrance of flowers, spirits should have been high during such a beautiful season.

They were originally carefree, unrestrained characters, why would they be so troubled?

Hua Manlou was blind, and the blind do not light lamps, but the one who had lit the hexagonal lamp on the table was precisely he.

There are many things in the world that are just like this – they should not have happened, but they did.

The Wooden Taoist sighed and finally opened his mouth: "Every one has made mistakes, but so long as he repents, that is a good thing." He was trying very hard to restrain himself, but his voice still sounded rather agitated: "However, there are some things where you absolutely cannot do wrong, once you have made a mistake, you only have one path to go!"

"A dead end?" Sikong Zhaixing asked.

The Wooden Taoist nodded and picked up the antique bronze paperweight on the table; twelve paper cards, with twelve names written on it.

Twelve famous names!

"They shouldn't have died, whoever wanted to kill them wouldn't have had it easy. A pity they had all committed a fatal mistake!"

He retrieved four from the pile of paper cards: "Especially these four, I'm sure you have heard of them."

Four paper cards, four names.

Gao Tao: Phoenix Tail Sect's third section chief

Crime: Turncoat

Bounty hunter: Ximen Chuixue

Fate: On the run for thirteen days, died in the marshes.

Gu Feiyun: True successor to Bashan Swordsman

Crime: Killed friend's son and seduced friend's wife

Bounty hunter: Ximen Chuixue

Fate: On the run for fifteen days, died in the busy downtown.

Liu Qingqing: Famed swordswoman of Huainan, wife of Diancang swordsman Xie Jian

Crime: Adultery, murdered husband

Bounty hunter: Ximen Chuixue

Fate: On the run for nineteen days, died in the wilderness.

“One-armed Divine Dragon” Hai Qikuo

Crime: Indiscriminately killing innocent people

Bounty hunter: Ximen Chuixue

Fate: On the run for nineteen days, died at sea after boat capsized.

Every one had heard of these four names, but the one name they were most familiar with was Ximen Chuixue’s!

Which self-respecting martial artist had not heard of Ximen Chuixue? Who would dare say his swordplay was not unparalleled?

Swordsman Xiaoxiang suddenly said: “I’ve seen Ximen Chuixue.”

Since that duel at the Forbidden City, even this number one imperial guard had to concede that Ximen Chuixue’s skill was unmatched: “But I am not able to see how he enjoys poking his nose into other people’s business.”

“This isn’t frivolous business,” said Hua Manlou.

Sikong Zhaixing immediately added: “He rarely makes new friends, but hates people who betray their friends.”

Swordsman Xiaoxiang shut his mouth, but Second Master Tang began to speak.

The Tang family of Sichuan was famous for its use of poisoned hidden weapons, equally well-known was Second Master Tang's dislike of talking, but he suddenly asked: "You think their fatal mistake was to have betrayed their friends?"

"Isn't that the case?" Sikong Zhaixing asked.

Second Master Tang shook his head and did not say another word, because he knew someone else would understand the point he was trying to put across.

Indeed, another person understood: "Their crimes were different, but the fatal mistake was the same."

"Which is?"

"Ximen Chuixue!" the Wooden Taoist slowly said: "Should Ximen Chuixue decide to kill someone, nobody would be able to escape."

Even if one could, one couldn't live beyond nineteen days.

"These twelve people all died by Ximen Chuixue's sword." The Wooden Taoist's expression was even graver: "And now there's another person who has committed the same fatal mistake, and the crime is even more serious."

"Oh?"

"He not only betrayed a friend, the one he betrayed is Ximen Chuixue!"

"Who is this person?"

"Lu Xiaofeng!"

A while of heavy silence, so heavy that it was suffocating.

The first to break that silence was Swordsman Xiaoxiang: "I know Lu Xiaofeng is not only Ximen Chuixue's friend, he's also his benefactor."

The Wooden Taoist sighed: "It's a pity that gratitude has been repaid, but vengeance has not been redressed!"

"For what?" Swordsman Xiaoxiang asked.

"Stealing his wife," the Wooden Taoist said.

Swordsman Xiaoxiang was startled and asked: "Is there proof?"

"Yes."

"What proof?"

"He saw them in bed with his own eyes."

Swordsman Xiaoxiang suddenly lifted the cup in front of him and downed his wine; Sikong Zhaixing was even quicker.

The only one who could still maintain his composure was Hua Manlou; his cup of wine was still full, he had only had a sip: "Lu Xiaofeng is not that kind of person, there must be something more to this."

Sikong Zhaixing agreed immediately: "Maybe he was drunk, maybe he was drugged, or maybe they were not doing anything on the bed at all."

These excuses were not very good, and he was not very pleased with them, so he drank another cup.

Those who draw conclusions are always the ones who speak the least.

"I do not know Lu Xiaofeng, but I do know he has done the Tang family a good turn." Second Master Tang delivered the conclusion: "Regardless of whether there is more to this matter, we must find him and clarify this personally."

The Wooden Taoist, however, was shaking his head.

"You don't want to find him?" Sikong Zhaixing asked.

"It's not that I don't want to find, it's that I can't," Wooden Taoist replied.

Lu Xiaofeng had been on the run the moment this matter broke out, nobody knew where he'd escaped to.

The Wooden Taoist spread out the twelve cards, said: "That is why I have invited you all here to look at these..."

Sikong Zhaixing interrupted him, saying: "Lu Xiaofeng is neither Gao Tao nor One-armed Divine Dragon, what have these bastards' affairs got to do with us?"

"There is some connection," Wooden Taoist said.

"What connection?"

"Their escape route."

If they hoped to find Lu Xiaofeng, they would have to deduce which route he had chosen to use.

The Wooden Taoist continued: "These were highly skilled, experienced, wily and smart members of the martial arts fraternity. When they chose to be on the run, they must have had very elaborate plans, and the escape routes that they had chosen would not have been too bad."

"Unfortunately they still couldn't escape their fate," Sikong Zhaixing said coldly.

"Even then, we can still use them as reference," Wooden Taoist said.

The escape plans of these twelve men could roughly be divided into four main routes –

Buy a boat and escape via the sea

Leave the city and enter the desert

Infiltrate into the busy downtown

Flee into the barren hills and treacherous rapids

The Wooden Taoist said: "You are all Lu Xiaofeng's old friends and know him very well, which route do you think he would take?"

No one could answer him.

No one wanted to be certain that his prediction was right.

Hua Manlou slowly said: "He wouldn't flee to the sea or enter the desert."

Nobody asked him how he could be so certain of that, because every one knew he had some sort of special ability and touch.

Sikong Zhaixing had finished his eighth cup of wine and said: "I am also sure of one thing."

Every one was listening.

"Lu Xiaofeng definitely will not die."

Someone doubted that prediction: "Why?"

Sikong Zhaixing said: "I know Lu Xiaofeng's skills, and have seen Ximen Chuixue's swordplay."

Of course, he could not deny the speed and accuracy of Ximen Chuixue's skills: "However, since his marriage and the birth of his child, his swordplay has weakened, because his heart has softened."

Because he was no longer the god of sword, he had gradually become more human.

"I had thought so as well, but now I know we have all been wrong," Wooden Taoist said.

"We are not wrong," Sikong Zhaixing insisted.

The Wooden Taoist shook his head, said: "Before the duel at the Forbidden City, his sword had indeed lost its edge, because what he felt for his wife had surpassed his intense passion for the sword."

Swordsman Xiaoxiang had evidently understood the meaning of the sentence: "But things were different after he defeated the Master of White Cloud Castle."

Whoever had defeated such a skilled martial arts exponent as the

Master of White Cloud Castle would naturally be in high spirits and want to move to the next level.

The duel at the Forbidden City had evidently reignited his passion for the sword, which once again exceeded the love he had for his wife.

Perhaps it was his neglect of his wife that had aroused Lu Xiaofeng's sympathy and caused all this mess.

Every one had thought of this point, but no one wanted to voice it out.

The Wooden Taoist said: "I saw Lu Xiaofeng recently and he told me himself that Ximen Chuixue's skill had reached the 'sword-less' state."

What does it mean to be in a "sword-less" state?

- Although one holds no sword in his hand, his sword remains, is everywhere.
- Man and sword are one, he is the sword; so long as he exists, anything in the world can be his sword!
- Such a state means one has almost reached the pinnacle of swordplay, and very few can surpass him!

The Wooden Taoist sighed again and said: "Lu Xiaofeng was drunk when I saw him, he told me that if there were still one person who could kill him, that person would be Ximen Chuixue!"

Another silence, as they all came to the conclusion – if Ximen Chuixue caught up with Lu Xiaofeng, the latter would definitely die by his sword.

The question was – where had Lu Xiaofeng escaped to? How long could he stay away?

“Even if he didn’t take the sea or desert routes, he could have lost himself in the crowded downtown or vanished among the barren hills and treacherous rapids.”

The options had narrowed: “But then who would know how many busy cities or barren hills there are in the world?”

Second Master Tang suddenly stood up and walked out.

Cup in hand, Sikong Zhaixing hollered: “Are you leaving?”

“I’m not here to drink,” Second Master Tang said coldly.

“You can’t be bothered with this anymore?”

“It isn’t that I can’t be bothered, but I can’t do anything about it.”

Ancient Pine Hermit suddenly let out a long sigh as well, said: “Indeed we can’t do anything about it.”

Monk Bittergourd immediately nodded his head and agreed: “Indeed, indeed, indeed...”

By the time the third "Indeed" was out of his mouth, the three of them had already left.

Swordsman Xiaoxiang wasn't any slower than the trio.

Sikong Zhaixing looked at the wine in his cup, suddenly set it down heavily, and said loudly: "I'm not here to drink either, don't know who's the bastard who came to drink." He too strode out.

There were only two people left, but the one who could still maintain his composure was only Hua Manlou.

The cup in the Wooden Taoist's hands had been crushed into smithereens.

Hua Manlou laughed instead, saying: "Do you know where they have gone?"

"Who the hell knows[1]."

"I know." He was still smiling. "I'm not a ghost, but I know."

"Where did you say they'd gone?" Wooden Taoist couldn't resist asking.

"If we rush to Ximen Villa right now, we'd definitely find them, and not one less."

Wooden Taoist did not understand.

Hua Manlou continued: "They have gone there because they want to know one thing –"

– If I were Lu Xiaofeng and I wanted to begin my escape from this place, which route would I take?

Hua Manlou said: "When they have thought about it, they will definitely continue their pursuit along that route."

"Why didn't they say so?" Wooden Taoist asked.

"They were afraid of being wrong and letting their error affect others."

"You are certain?"

Hua Manlou nodded and smiled: "I am, because I know they are all Lu Xiaofeng's friends."

His face was radiant and his smile was bright; he loved life and was always confident of the positive side of human nature.

Wooden Taoist finally gave a long sigh and said: "To have as many friends as Lu Xiaofeng does is indeed a good thing. Unfortunately this time he himself has made a mistake."

He patted Hua Manlou's shoulder and added: "Let's go. If there is still one person who can find Lu Xiaofeng, that would be you."

"Not me."

"Who else but you?"

"Lu Xiaofeng himself."

If one has lost his self, then who else can find him other than the man himself?

[1] The literal sentence in Chinese is 鬼知道, which means "only a ghost would know", and is meant to be said in as much the same tone as "who the hell knows" (basically sarcastic). That's why Hua Manlou's reply was that he's not a ghost, but he still knows (where everyone else has gone).

Chapter 2 – Adversity makes for strange bedfellows

Translated by Junny

Even if Lu Xiaofeng had lost himself, at least he hadn't lost his bearings.

He was certain this road led westwards, and once he crossed the hills ahead, he would be able to find spring water that he could drink.

Night had fallen and the fog in the mountains was thick, but he still believed his judgment was right. However, he was wrong again.

There were neither hills nor spring water ahead, only a thick mass of forest.

He had been on the run for three days, in these barren mountain ranges where he couldn't even find spring water.

Even if his friends could see him now, they might not be able to recognise that he was Lu Xiaofeng.

The suave and charming Lu Xiaofeng who could always make girls swoon.

The forest was pitch black, and danger lurked in all shapes and forms in absolute darkness. Every kind of danger was potentially fatal, so if a person lost his way in the forest, hunger and thirst would surely kill him!

He was not certain he could find his way out of this mazy forest. He had already lost confidence in his own judgment.

But he could only forge ahead; even though there was no other road he could choose, he could not backtrack!

Retreating would only be scarier and more dangerous, because Ximen Chuixue was hot on his tail!

Even though Lu Xiaofeng could not see, he could feel it, feel the menacing aura of the sword.

At times, for no good reason, he'd feel chills down his back, and he would know then that Ximen Chuixue was nearby.

Being on the run is a kind of torture.

Hunger and thirst, fatigue, fear, worry... they are like countless whips, all flogging him nonstop.

It was enough to push him to the verge of a breakdown, not to mention he was carrying an injury.

A sword wound!

Every time the wound began to hurt, he would recall the impossible speed of that sword!

The "swordless" Ximen Chuixue had used his sword after all!

– I used that sword to defeat Ye Gucheng, so who else in the world would be fit enough to make me pull out that sword again?

– Lu Xiaofeng, only Lu Xiaofeng!

– Because of you, I used the sword, and it will not return to its sheath unless it is stained with your blood!

It was impossible to describe the speed and ferociousness of the move.

If there were really immortals and spirits on earth, they too would turn pale when faced with such a strike.

A flash of the sword and blood will flow!

No one could counter this blow, not even Lu Xiaofeng, but still he didn't die!

Not dying was a miracle!

He was probably the only one who could escape alive from that lethal strike!

Dark, endless darkness.

How many dangers abound in the dark?

Lu Xiaofeng didn't even think about that. If he worried too much, he would probably have suffered a nervous breakdown or even gone mad.

He had entered this pitch-black forest, and that was equivalent to a wild beast falling into a trap; it was no longer in his control.

Still no water, no food.

He broke off a branch, used it to feel his way about slowly, just as a blind man would.

This stick was like his white cane.

A man who was well and alive had to resort to relying on a lifeless piece of wood – Lu Xiaofeng laughed when he thought of that.

It was a laughter filled with shame, grief, pain and self-mockery.

Only now did he truly understand the pain of the blind, and realised Hua Manlou's greatness.

How much love did a blind man have if he could still live happily and in peace?

There was a tree in front, a tall and big tree.

Lu Xiaofeng stopped at the tree, gasping for breath; perhaps this was the only time he could afford to take a breather.

– Ximen Chuixue would have paused to reconsider before stepping into this forest.

– However, he would still come chasing in.

There was almost nothing that would stop him; he was determined to have Lu Xiaofeng die by his sword!

It was near silence in the dark, but this sort of quiet was also one of the most frightening sounds.

Lu Xiaofeng's breathing seemed to have stopped too; suddenly he struck with lightning speed and caught something with two fingers!

He hadn't seen anything, but he'd already struck.

He did not usually miss.

In times of real danger, man would be no different from beasts, would develop the sort of abilities and sixth sense inherent in animals.

He had caught a snake.

With the snake's tail between his fingers, he twisted and shook it, then

bit down on an area seven 'cun' from the head of the snake (where the heart was).

The snake blood, fishy and bitter, slid down his throat and into his stomach.

He suddenly felt as though he had become a beast. But he didn't stop; as the snake blood flowed, he immediately felt a burst of life!

He would accept whatever could give him life, could allow him to go on living!

He didn't want to die, could not die!

If he died now, he would turn into a vengeful ghost and return to haunt the living, so as to redress his grievances!

The darkness was beginning to fade into a curious shade of dull, dead grey.

He'd finally endured through this long night and it was finally dawn.

But so what if daylight came?

Even if darkness was long gone, death was still clipping at his heels!

He snatched up a handful of fallen leaves and wiped the blood off his

hands; it was then that he heard a sound.

A human voice.

He wasn't sure where it was coming from, it seemed as though someone was moaning and gasping for breath.

How could there be anyone here at this point in time?

Who would be in this forest, on the path of no return, if he were not at his wits' end?

Was it Ximen Chuixue?

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt as though his whole body had frozen over and his breathing had stopped, as he listened quietly.

The weak moaning, panting sounds floated over little by little, the sounds were filled with pain.

A pain filled with fear, a kind of hopeless pain.

This kind of pain could not be faked.

Even if this person were Ximen Chuixue, the pain he was suffering now would not be any lesser than Lu Xiaofeng's.

Could he have suffered some sort of fatal blow? Otherwise how could he have lost that deadly aura of the sword?

Lu Xiaofeng was determined to find out; regardless of whether that person was Ximen Chuixue, he had to find out.

And of course he found out.

The fallen leaves were wet, so was the mud.

A man was lying on the wet mud, among the fallen leaves, his entire body twisted with pain.

He had white sideburns and was old, haggard, weary, sorrowful and fearful.

He saw Lu Xiaofeng and seemed to struggle to spring up, but ended up suffering a fresh round of pain.

There was a sword in his hand, its shape was classically elegant and made of pure steel; whoever saw it could tell it was a good sword.

But this sword was not frightening, because this person wasn't Ximen Chuixue.

Lu Xiaofeng expelled a long breath, muttered: "No, it's not him."

The man's throat worked and there was a trace of hope in the eyes that were filled with fear, as he wheezed: "Who... who are you?"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled, said: "I'm no one, just a passer-by."

"A passer-by?" the old man asked.

"You must be wondering why there are passers-by around here!"

The old man scrutinized him from head to toe, and suddenly, a cunning look entered his eyes as he said: "Don't tell me you are on the same road as I am?"

"Most probably," Lu Xiaofeng said.

The old man laughed.

His laugh was miserable and bitter, and he couldn't stop coughing once he started laughing.

Lu Xiaofeng also realized that he was injured; there was also another more serious wound on the chest.

"Who did you think I was?" the old man suddenly asked.

"Someone else," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Was it the person who wants to kill you?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed too, asked instead: "Who did you think I was, the person who has come to kill you?"

The old man wanted to deny but couldn't.

They gazed at each other like two wounded beasts.

No one could understand their expressions or their feelings.

After a long while, the old man let out a long breath, said: "You should go."

"You want me to go?"

"Even if I didn't, you would leave anyway."

He was still smiling, but more bitterly. "My situation is worse than yours, so naturally I won't be able to help you. You don't know me, so you wouldn't help me either."

Lu Xiaofeng didn't speak, he had also stopped laughing.

He knew this old man was speaking the truth; he was in a difficult situation, much worse than what the old man had imagined.

One person might not be able to make it out alive, much less with an extra burden.

This old man was evidently a very heavy burden.

After another long while, Lu Xiaofeng expelled a long breath as well, said: "Indeed I should leave."

The old man nodded his head and shut his eyes, not bothering to look at him.

Lu Xiaofeng continued: "If you were only a wild dog, I would have left by now, but..."

The old man suddenly interrupted, saying: "Unfortunately, I'm human, not a dog."

"I'm no dog either, I'm also human," Lu Xiaofeng said with a forced smile.

"It's a pity," the old man agreed.

Even though his eyes seemed to be shut, he was actually looking at Lu Xiaofeng out of the corner of his eye. Again, the cunning look returned.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled again, said: "You knew anyway that I wasn't going to go."

"Oh?"

"You're human, so am I, and I can't watch you rot to death here."

The old man's eyes flew open, widened and stared at Lu Xiaofeng, asked: "You will take me away?"

"What do you think?"

The old man blinked. "Of course you will take me away, because you are human and so am I."

"That's not enough reason."

"Not enough? What else is there?"

"A scumbag is still human."

Nobody understood why Lu Xiaofeng suddenly said this, much less the old man, who could only wait for him to continue.

"If I take someone away with me, that's because I'm not only human, I'm also a scumbag, an extra big scumbag."

It was spring, the season when all things began to blossom and grow.

The trees and leaves that had withered were sprouting out in thick

bunches again, such that not even sunlight could pierce through.

It was still a patch of misty grey between the branches and leaves, and one could only see a hint of murky shadows.

One could see, but not very far ahead.

Lu Xiaofeng helped the old man lie down before he did. He couldn't move another step, not even if Ximen Chuixue was nearby.

They had walked quite some distance, but as soon as he lowered his head, he saw once again his own footprints.

He'd exhausted himself running, but still ended up on the same track.

This was no longer any sort of irony, it was plain sad, the kind where desperate people at their wits' end could only understand.

He was panting, and so was the old man.

A huge python was slithering down from the tree. A python of that size would no doubt possess immense strength, enough to strangle the life out of any living thing.

But he wouldn't think of that. The old man couldn't move, and incredibly, the python didn't touch him, merely slid past them quietly.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled, not knowing how he could still do so.

The old man slanted a glance at him, said suddenly: "Of course I can't call you a scumbag."

"You can call me a big scumbag," Lu Xiaofeng said. He was still smiling.

There are different kinds of smiles. Some are more miserable than crying, and his was of this sort.

There was only smiling, no laughing, and in the deep silence, time seemed to pass especially slowly.

After a long while, the old man suddenly said: "Big scumbag."

"Mm."

"Why don't you ask me who I am, what my name is?"

"I don't have to."

"You don't?"

"We're going to die soon anyway, whoever heard of a dead person asking another dead person his name?"

The old man gazed at him for a long time, wanted to speak but didn't,

then looked at his eyebrows and beard, and finally said: "I suddenly thought of someone."

"Who is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Lu Xiaofeng," the old man said. "The one with 'four eyebrows'."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled again, said: "You should have thought of that, since the world's biggest scumbag is Lu Xiaofeng."

The old man sighed, said: "But I can't imagine why Lu Xiaofeng would end up like this."

"What did you think Lu Xiaofeng would be like?"

"Once, a long time ago, I heard that Lu Xiaofeng was a playboy who enjoyed plenty of female attention, and was very highly-skilled too. So I always thought Lu Xiaofeng must have been a very handsome and awe-inspiring man, but now you look like..."

He didn't finish the sentence, but Lu Xiaofeng continued it for him: "Like a desperate wild dog chased and forced into a corner."

The old man smiled too, said: "Seems as though you've stirred up some big trouble."

"Indeed it's big."

"Is it because of a woman?"

Lu Xiaofeng could only give a resigned, bitter smile.

"Who is the woman's husband?" the old man asked. "I heard you could even counter the Master of White Cloud Castle's 'Flying Immortal' stroke, what else could force you into desperation?"

"Only one person."

"I've thought about it and it seems too that there's only one person."

"And who do you think this person is?"

"Is it Ximen Chuixue?"

Lu Xiaofeng's bitter, resigned smile was back again.

The old man sighed. "You've got yourself into quite a big mess, I simply can't understand how you'd get involved in something like this."

"I didn't really do much," Lu Xiaofeng said. "I only slept on the same bed with his wife, and it so happened he saw."

The old man stared at him in shock. After a long while, he shook his head and said: "So you have some nerve."

"And what about you?" Lu Xiaofeng countered. "What mess did you get into?"

The old man was silent for a long while, then sighed and said: "I'm in big trouble as well."

"I can tell."

"Oh?"

"If someone is wearing clothes worth three hundred taels of silver and carrying a good sword worth three thousand taels of silver, but doesn't at all look like he's been hounded into desperation, this person must have stirred up some big trouble."

The old man couldn't help a bitter smile, said: "I've gotten myself involved in more than one mess."

"How many are there?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The old man put up two fingers, saying: "One is Ye Guhong, the other is the Pink Swallow."

"Ye Guhong, Wudang's Little White Dragon?"

The old man nodded.

"And that's 'Flower Thief' Pink Swallow[1]?"

The old man nodded again.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "Indeed you're in deep shit."

Ye Guhong was the secular disciple of Wudang Sect, and one of the most promising. It was said he was also the distant cousin of the Master of White Cloud Castle, who had personally imparted some swordplay tips to him.

Pink Swallow's reputation in the martial arts world was even bigger, very few could match his qinggong and skill with hidden weapons.

Lu Xiaofeng continued: "But Ye Guhong is a member of a prestigious sect, while Pink Swallow is a master thief of Lower Five Sect, so how did you get involved with both of them at the same time?"

"You can't figure out?" the old man asked.

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head.

"Actually it's rather simple. Ye Guhong is my nephew, and it so happens that Pink Swallow is too. Their wives, coincidentally, were guests at my place..."

Ye Guhong travelled the world, while Pink Swallow slept around; naturally their wives would be lonely.

"So I couldn't not comfort them," the old man explained. "But unfortunately I was caught."

Lu Xiaofeng looked at him in shock. After a long while, he said in a resigned tone: "Looks as if you are not only bold, you don't recognise family ties as well."

The old man smiled, said: "You thought I wasn't?"

Lu Xiaofeng seemed even more shocked. "Don't tell me you really are?"

"In the last ten years, very few in the martial arts world have heard of my name, I didn't expect you to know."

Twenty years ago, there were three notorious master thieves and the first one was "Cold-blooded" Dugu Mei[2]. If a man had a name like that, one could imagine how heartless and ruthless he was.

Lu Xiaofeng was resigned. "Looks like you've got the right name after all."

Dugu Mei said blandly: "I have no care for familial ties, while you value women above friends. You're a big scumbag and I'm pretty much the same, so we're on the same path because we have something in common."

"Fortunately we have something not in common," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"What's that?"

"Now I can still leave, but you will have to lie here and wait for your death."

Dugu Mei smiled.

Lu Xiaofeng continued: "If you think that I still can't harden my heart to do that, you're wrong. Since you care for no one, why can't I do the same?"

"Of course you can," Dugu Mei replied.

Lu Xiaofeng had already stood up and was walking away.

Dugu Mei watched him, then slowly said: "But I guarantee that once you leave, you'll regret it."

Lu Xiaofeng couldn't help turning his head to ask: "Why?"

"There are not only man-eating beasts in this world, there are also men who will eat their own kind."

"I know that," Lu Xiaofeng said. "You're one."

"Do you know there are other things in the world that eat humans?"

Dugu Mei asked.

"And that is?"

"Forests," Dugu Mei said. "Some forests will swallow up those who lose their way. Once they walk into such forests, they will be eaten up and won't be able to walk out alive."

It was almost noon, but the surrounding areas were still a dull, murky grey. The huge, ugly trees and rotting swamp made it impossible for one to find a way out.

If there were really man-eating forests, this must be it.

Lu Xiaofeng finally turned around, stared at the old man's face. "You know the way?" he asked. "You're confident of getting out?"

Dugu Mei smiled again, said leisurely: "Not only can I get you out, I can ensure that Ximen Chuixue won't ever be able to find you."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed coldly.

Dugu Mei continued: "I can take you to a place. No matter how highly-skilled Ximen Chuixue is, he won't be able to find it."

Lu Xiaofeng gazed at him, neither moving nor speaking. In the distance, however, someone had let out a chilling laugh. It had sounded faraway, but in the twinkling of an eye, it was here.

The one who had arrived wasn't the qinggong master Pink Swallow, but rather a pale, sickly white man – sickly white face, sickly white hands and sword, dressed in a snow-white outfit.

Having searched in this dark swampy forest for over forty hours, his spirits were still as cool and steady as ice, and there were only a few spots of mud on his clothes.

He was like his sword, untouched by blood, untouched by mud!

The moment he appeared, Lu Xiaofeng had frozen, but just as suddenly relaxed.

Dugu Mei laughed mockingly as he said: "Did you think he was Ximen Chuixue?"

Lu Xiaofeng couldn't deny that.

This young man was exceedingly like Ximen Chuixue – pale face, haughty and cold demeanor, snow-white clothes... even his posture was the same as Ximen Chuixue's. Even though he was far younger than Ximen Chuixue and his features softer, he looked just like Ximen Chuixue's shadow.

Dugu Mei said: "His name is Ye Guhong, unrelated to Ximen Chuixue right down to his ancestors, but he could really pass for Ximen Chuixue's son."

Lu Xiaofeng couldn't help a smile. "There's some resemblance."

"Do you know why he's become like this?" Dugu Mei asked.

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head.

Dugu Mei laughed coldly. "Because he's just dying to be Ximen Chuixue's son."

"Maybe he just wants to be another Ximen Chuixue," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Dugu Mei said frostily: "Unfortunately, he's picked up none of Ximen Chuixue's good qualities, just all the bad ones."

The ice-cold, haughty nature, like the pristine snow of the mountains in the distance; the shining vitality of life, like the shooting stars in the winter sky; that peerless sword...

How many young men in the martial arts world would not worship Ximen Chuixue as their personal god?

Lu Xiaofeng gazed into the distance and suddenly sighed, said: "At least there's something of Ximen Chuixue that others can't imitate."

"His sword?" Dugu Mei asked.

"Not his sword, his loneliness."

Loneliness.

That chilly loneliness akin to the frosty snow on the faraway mountains, the aching loneliness that was like the shooting stars of the winter night.

Only someone who has truly experienced this kind of loneliness and was willing to endure it could reach the level that Ximen Chuixue had attained.

Ye Guhong had been eyeing Lu Xiaofeng frostily and had yet to utter a word.

Suddenly, he let out a chilly laugh, said: "What kind of thing are you, that you're fit to even discuss him!"

Lu Xiaofeng could offer a forced smile. He knew Dugu Mei would be rushing to answer that, and he wasn't wrong.

Dugu Mei was already saying: "He can't really be considered a 'thing', just a human after all. But if there's one person qualified to talk about Ximen Chuixue, he would be the one."

"Why" Ye Guhong couldn't help asking.

"Because he has four eyebrows," Dugu Mei replied leisurely. "And because he's the only one in this world who has slept with Ximen Chuixue's wife."

Ye Guhong looked startled. "Lu Xiaofeng, are you Lu Xiaofeng?"

Lu Xiaofeng couldn't deny.

The veins on Ye Guhong's hand that was gripping his sword were nearly popping out, as he clipped out: "I should have killed you on Ximen Chuixue's behalf..."

He was interrupted by a voice high up on the trees: "A pity he's not the one we have to kill this time."

A flurry of activity among the thick leaves saw a man sail down as smoothly as a swallow.

A pink swallow.

A rosy face that was not unlike a young girl's, close-fitting pink clothes, and on the pink belt around his waist hung a pink pouch.

Even the look in his eyes was 'pink', the sort that most men would have when they see the bare thigh of a young lady.

The worst of it was that he was sporting that exact expression when he gazed at Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt like vomiting.

Pink Swallow was unconcerned with his reaction; he was still smiling and looking at him, said gently: "Lu Xiaofeng is indeed Lu Xiaofeng, you have not disappointed me."

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"You don't look too good now," Pink Swallow said, "but if you get a basin of water and a bar of soap, then take a good bath, you'd be a very good-looking man." His eyes crinkled as he scrutinised Lu Xiaofeng from head to toe. "I can imagine it now."

Lu Xiaofeng didn't quite feel like vomiting now, because the thing he'd most like to do now was to smash this man's nose flat.

Fortunately, Pink Swallow had already turned to look at Ye Guhong, saying: "This one is mine, I won't let you touch him."

Ye Guhong also looked as though he was about to retch, and coldly said: "You will take both men and women?"

Pink Swallow chuckled and said: "I'd want you too sometimes."

Ye Guhong's already pale face turned green.

Pink Swallow said: "I know you've always hated me, but you can't do without me because if you didn't have me around this time, you wouldn't have found this wily old fox and you can forget about going back alive."

He smiled and continued: "You young heroes from prestigious sects can show off all you like in the world out there, but in this man-eating forest, you probably won't survive beyond four hours."

Ye Guhong, surprisingly, did not refute that.

Pink Swallow gently expelled a breath, said: "So if I allow you to have this old fox, you should feel very satisfied."

Ye Guhong's hand gripped the sword hilt again, said: "You must let me strike, you know I've sworn to kill him with my own hands."

"Lu Xiaofeng, you mean?" Pink Swallow asked.

Ye Guhong gritted his teeth and said: "Lu Xiaofeng is yours, I just want him..."

Dugu Mei suddenly broke into laughter, said: "You're all wrong, Lu Xiaofeng is neither his nor yours!"

"Whose, then?" Pink Swallow asked.

"Mine," Dugu Mei replied.

Pink Swallow laughed uproariously as well, and said: "Even if he's got my bad habit, he wouldn't fall for the likes of you."

"But if he wants to live, he can't let me die at your hands," Dugu Mei said.

Pink Swallow turned to Lu Xiaofeng, said gently: "If you stay out of this, I can let you live too."

Lu Xiaofeng didn't reply.

Pink Swallow let out a sigh and said: "Young Master Ye, you can strike now!"

"Fine."

The sword was out of its sheath by the time he said that. The speed with which he pulled out the sword paled in comparison to Ximen Chuixue's, but was certainly a cut above others'.

His attack was swift and ruthless; other than the Wudang skills he already possessed, there were at least two other schools of swordplay mixed in them.

This stroke was the most exquisite of his swordplay. It was also a fatal blow, an unerring stroke that would leave no business unfinished.

Dugu Mei's mouth was wide open; he wanted to scream, but not a sound came out.

True enough, Lu Xiaofeng had not stepped up to counter the blow.

Pink Swallow was still laughing, but suddenly, his smile froze.

The blade of a sword suddenly pierced through from his heart, blood splattered and rained down right before his eyes.

This was his own blood?

He would not believe it!

Unfortunately, he had to believe.

He stretched out his hand to retrieve the hidden weapons in his pouch, but he had already collapsed.

Blood was still dripping from the tip of the sword.

Ye Guhong gazed at the blood droplets on the edge of the sword, then gently blew off the final droplet.

This was a habit unique to Ximen Chuixue, and he had imitated it to perfection.

Unfortunately, he wasn't Ximen Chuixue, never would be!

Every time after he'd killed someone, there would instantly be that

sense of isolation and loneliness about Ximen Chuixue, that incredible feeling of emptiness and disinterest.

Blowing the last droplet of blood off his sword was merely like someone returning home in a snowstorm brushing the last snowflake from his cloak.

He was blowing off snow, not blood.

But now, Ye Guhong's eyes were filled with indescribable excitement, as though he was ready to rush into the snowstorm and conquer.

He was blowing off blood, not snow.

The last droplet, coincidentally, fell on Pink Swallow's face, which seemed to still be twitching; however, his eyes had popped out like those of dead fish, and the lust in his eyes was no longer evident.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt this person was very pitiful.

He'd always felt sorry for those who died without knowing why, and he knew this one wouldn't have died in peace.

The blood had dried, and the sword was back in its sheath.

Ye Guhong suddenly turned around and stared at Dugu Mei.

Dugu Mei was also staring back at him, his eyes filled with suspicion and surprise.

"You didn't expect me to kill him, did you?" Ye Guhong asked coldly.

Indeed, Dugu Mei had not expected it, nobody had.

"You're not here to kill me?"

"No."

Dugu Mei was even more surprised. "But you were..."

"I was indeed determined to have you die by my sword," Ye Guhong interrupted him.

"So why did you change your mind?" Dugu Mei asked.

"Because now I know you're no longer alive."

This was a very odd sentence and difficult to understand, but Dugu Mei seemed to get it and expelled a long breath. "So you're from the Mansion as well?" he asked.

"You didn't expect that, did you?" Ye Guhong said.

"Not even in my dreams," Dugu Mei admitted.

Ye Guhong's eyes were mocking, and after a long while, said slowly: "Of course you wouldn't have thought of it. Some people do things they wouldn't have expected to."

Dugu Mei was sighing as he said: "The people in the Mansion all seem to be those you'd never expect to be."

"Precisely, that's why it is able to exist."

Dugu Mei nodded his head slowly, and suddenly changed the topic. "Have you seen Lu Xiaofeng fight?" he asked.

"No," Ye Guhong said.

"You don't know the level of his skills?"

"No."

"What do you know of him?"

"I know he once managed to take a blow from the Master of White Cloud Castle's 'Flying Immortal' swordplay," Ye Guhong said.

"But he's now wounded by Ximen Chuixue," Dugu Mei said.

"I can tell."

"So let me ask you something that you must consider very carefully before you reply," Dugu Mei said. His expression turned serious as he enunciated each word: "Are you confident of killing him now?"

Ye Guhong was silent. There was that mocking look in his eyes again, and the veins on his forehead seemed more pronounced. After a long while, he replied slowly: "I am not Ximen Chuixue."

Dugu Mei gazed at him for a long time before he turned to Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng was expressionless; it was as if he'd not understood what they were saying.

Dugu Mei suddenly laughed, saying: "Just now you didn't save me."

Lu Xiaofeng was silent.

"So I don't wish to kill you, since we aren't confident we can do it," Dugu Mei said.

Lu Xiaofeng remained silent.

"We didn't know each other and never crossed the other's path; it remains thus."

"But we were just on the same road," Lu Xiaofeng had finally opened his mouth.

"Such are the vicissitudes of life," Dugu Mei said lightly. "Change abounds, you and I are no exceptions."

"That's reasonable," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Dugu Mei said: "So you are still you, I am still me, and you'd best be on your way."

"Not good," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"No?"

"Because the road I'll take is still the one I've been on."

Dugu Mei smiled. "Well, that's your problem."

"And you?"

"Of course I have my own path to take."

"Which one? The one to the Mansion?"

Dugu Mei's expression hardened, said coldly: "Since you've heard, why bother to ask?"

Lu Xiaofeng persisted. "What sort of Mansion is this that you're going to?"

"It's one that you can't go."

"Why not?"

"Because you're not dead."

"So it's a mansion for the dead people!"

"Indeed."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "You guys should go." He waved his hand, smiling: "I don't want to go to a mansion of dead people, neither do I want to be dead. So long as I can stay alive, even one hour is good enough."

He walked off without a care in the world, and vanished quickly in the grey of the forest.

It wasn't until he'd disappeared that Dugu Mei snapped to alertness and yelled: "You really let him go?"

"He's gone," Ye Guhong replied coldly.

"You're not afraid that he'll leak the secret of the Mansion?"

"He doesn't know much, and in these circumstances, he might not even live beyond an hour."

"Well, he's still alive now," Dugu Mei said. "And he could follow us secretly."

"Where are we going?" Ye Guhong asked.

"To the Mansion, of course," Dugu Mei said.

Ye Guhong laughed coldly. "You're wrong. We are not going to the Mansion; rather, if you want to go, you go alone!"

"You're not going?" Dugu Mei asked.

"Why should I?" Ye Guhong returned blandly.

Dugu Mei's expression changed.

"I know you have a contract with the Mansion, so I can't kill you," Ye Guhong said. "But I never said I was going to lead you there."

Dugu Mei's face was mottled with rage and he shrieked: "But you should know I can't even move an inch right now."

"That's your problem," Ye Guhong replied frostily. "What's that got to do with me?"

He drew his sword again and sliced off a large piece of tree bark, then laid it on a relatively dry area of the mud and sat down cross-legged.

Dugu Mei glared at him, and finally couldn't resist asking: "Why aren't you leaving?"

"Why should I?" Ye Guhong asked leisurely.

"Are you waiting for me to die?" Dugu Mei asked.

Ye Guhong replied: "You can take your time to die, I'm in no hurry." He was looking mighty comfortable, and had even brought out a piece of beef that was wrapped in oilpaper, and a flask of wine.

To an old man ravaged by hunger and thirst for seventy-two hours, the aroma of beef and wine was no longer mere temptation, it was a kind of torture.

He could only watch, as aromatic waves of the beef and wine pricked him like needles and every part of his body trembled.

Ye Guhong sipped some wine and let out a satisfied sigh. Suddenly he said: "I know you must be regretting in your heart about letting Lu Xiaofeng go just now, but there's something you don't know."

Dugu Mei was just about to start a conversation to distract himself, so immediately he asked: "What's that?"

"I didn't kill Lu Xiaofeng not because I wasn't confident of killing him," Ye Guhong said, "but because I'd rather let him die at Ximen Chuixue's hands."

"Oh!"

"So if he dares return, once my sword is out of its sheath, I'd make his blood splatter all over."

"So you mean there's no one in the world who can save me, and nobody can save Lu Xiaofeng," Dugu Mei said.

"Definitely not," Ye Guhong said.

In the moment that these words were said, a hand snaked over from behind the tree and stole away his flask of wine.

His reaction wasn't slow either. By the time the hand was withdrawn, he'd gone behind the tree.

There was no one behind the tree.

When he came back again, the flask of wine was in Dugu Mei's hand, and he was pouring the last of it into his own mouth.

The piece of beef in the oilpaper that had been on the tree bark was also gone.

Ye Guhong did not move again and his breathing seemed to have stopped; the murky forest was grey and silent as a graveyard.

There was no wind, but something floated down from the top of the tree.

Ye Guhong drew his sword and pierced through it. Stuck on the tip of his sword was actually that piece of oilpaper.

Dugu Mei burst into uproarious laughter and tears came out of his eyes.

Ye Guhong didn't seem to have heard any of it, but his face had turned green as he slowly plucked the oilpaper off the tip of his sword.

Dugu Mei laughed: "There's no blood on that oilpaper, so what are you blowing?"

Ye Guhong still didn't hear that; in a flash, the sword was back in its sheath.

He settled down on the tree bark again and breathed in deeply twice. From his sleeve he took out a few pieces of paper and used needles to pin them one by one on the tree trunk behind. Then he coldly said: "This is the map to getting out of the forest and into the mountains. Whoever has the guts can come and take it."

Once again, he sat motionless, with his back facing the tree, eyes closed, as though an old monk gone into deep meditation.

Dugu Mei had stopped laughing; his eyes were wide open, fixed on the pieces of paper pinned to the tree trunk.

He knew this was Ye Guhong's way of luring the fish to bait.

Wudang was a sect known for its internal skills; Ye Guhong had been at Wudang since he was four years old, and his internal energy must have reached peak levels.

Now his mind and heart were one, and although his eyes were closed, anything within a fifty-foot radius would not escape his attention.

His bait was ready, but where was the fish? Would the fish bite?

Dugu Mei's breathing suddenly stopped; he'd seen a hand stretch out stealthily from behind the tree. Agile and brisk, it reached immediately for the pieces of paper on the tree trunk.

"Dong!" Just at this point, there was a flash of brilliance from the sword as the blade pierced through the wood and pinned the hand firmly to the tree trunk.

Dugu Mei's face blanched, so did Ye Guhong's.

He did not see blood.

The hand was no oilpaper, why wouldn't there be blood?

Dugu Mei expelled a long sigh; he had already realised that the blade had not pinned the hand to the tree. Rather, the blade was caught by the hand.

More precisely, wedged between two fingers.

Ye Guhong's pallor turned red again and sweat dripped down his face. He'd exerted all his might trying to wrench the sword away, but it was as though it'd been flattened beneath Mount Tai, it just refused to budge.

Whose fingers were these? Whose fingers had such extraordinary strength and power?

Lu Xiaofeng's!

It could only be Lu Xiaofeng!

The smile was back on Dugu Mei's face, as he said: "Now your sword is out of its sheath, but his blood hasn't splattered all over."

Ye Guhong gnashed his teeth, then suddenly released his hold on the sword and dashed behind the tree.

Lu Xiaofeng was indeed behind the tree grinning at him. In his hand was Ye Guhong's sword, its blade caught between two fingers.

Ye Guhong laughed coldly: "I don't need a sword to kill you."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled. "But the sword is yours, so I shall return it to you."

Ye Guhong had already struck, using Wudang's Golden Silk Palm, mixed with the Hand into Blade and Seventy-Two Grappling Techniques, his five fingers like hooks and with all the strength concentrated at the tips.

But Lu Xiaofeng actually returned the sword back to him, with the blade captured between two fingers and the hilt back into his hands.

Without conscious volition, he stretched out for it and his face immediately changed; blood trickled from between his fingers.

Lu Xiaofeng had sent over the hilt of the sword, but what he held in his hands was the tip.

He hadn't even seen how Lu Xiaofeng had done it.

Lu Xiaofeng was still smiling, saying: "This is your sword, nobody is going to steal it from you, so why did you exert so much effort?"

Ye Guhong's face had drained of blood, but suddenly said: "How many strokes did Ximen Chuixue need to wound you?"

"One," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"You couldn't counter even one blow?" Ye Guhong asked.

Lu Xiaofeng gave a forced smile.

"You weren't dead drunk then?" Ye Guhong asked.

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head.

Ye Guhong asked again: "With skills like these, you couldn't even take one blow from him?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and replied: "I know you've seen him fight, but to those on the sidelines, they can never understand the speed with which he strikes."

Ye Guhong's head bowed as he looked at his own hands.

Blood was still dripping from them, and he had not released his hold on the blade. Blood was also dripping from the tip of the blade, droplet by droplet...

This was his own blood.

When the last droplet fell, he let out a long sigh and pierced the sword right into his chest.

His breathing abruptly stopped and his eyes popped out.

Startled, Lu Xiaofeng said: "I don't want to kill you, why are you doing this?"

Perspiration dotted Ye Guhong's face and his breathing quickened and he struggled to get his words out: "I studied the sword for twenty years, believing myself to be unbeatable. I'd arranged to duel with Ximen Chuixue during the Dragon Boat Festival at high noon at the peak of the Forbidden City."

"This year's Dragon Boat Festival?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Ye Guhong nodded. "I had no hope of winning, but I was confident of giving him a good fight. However, having seen you today, I realized that even if I train for another twenty years, I would not be his match..."

At this point, he began coughing nonstop, but Lu Xiaofeng understood his meaning.

If he didn't turn up for the duel, he would not be able to face the martial arts fraternity; even if he did show up, it was just asking to be humiliated.

It was because he had suddenly realized there was such a huge gap between his skills and Ximen Chuixue's.

Lu Xiaofeng couldn't even take one stroke from Ximen Chuixue, and he hadn't even been able to figure out Lu Xiaofeng's moves. The disparity

between them was a kind of shame and dishonor.

To him, such humiliation was worse than having his wife raped.

Lu Xiaofeng was already feeling sorry for him and said: "You're dying because of this?"

Ye Guhong nodded.

Lu Xiaofeng let out a gentle sigh, then crossed over and whispered something into his ear.

Ye Guhong's face suddenly twisted and there was an indescribable expression in his eyes as he stared at Lu Xiaofeng.

Then he collapsed.

The strange thing was that after he collapsed, there seemed to be the faintest of smiles on his face.

There was no more blood on the tip of the sword.

The last droplet had been blown dry by the wind.

The man was dead, but the sword was still there, its brilliance clear as autumn waters.

Regardless of whether the blood on the sword was blown dry by man or wind, it didn't matter to this sword.

The sword is emotionless, but humans have emotions.

So the sword remains while people die.

Lu Xiaofeng gazed at this emotionless sword, couldn't help a long sigh.

– Why are there so many sentimental people in this world who want to devote their lives to an emotionless sword?

– Is this because there is some irresistible power of the sword that draws one to it?

Looking at the shining brilliance of the sword, Lu Xiaofeng felt as though he was beginning to be lost again...

[1] Pink Swallow's (nick)name in Chinese is 万里踏花粉燕子 (wan4 li3 ta4 hua1 fen3 yan4 zi), which stumped both mich and me. After an enlightening discussion, she figured the most appropriate meaning of the whole phrase would be "bisexual fiend". However, because he is often referred to as 粉燕子, this is translated as "Pink Swallow", while 万里踏花 is translated as "Flower Thief".

[2] Again, Dugu Mei's nickname is “六亲不认” (liu4 qin1 bu4 ren4), which means the person has no regard at all for familial ties or kinship. But that's quite a mouthful, and mich and I figured "cold-blooded" would be an appropriate substitute.

Chapter 3 – In the same boat

Translated by Junny

Being on the run hadn't ended, but darkness had already arrived.

In the dark there were only sounds of panting, two people panting. The sounds had stopped and they had collapsed.

It didn't matter whether it was dry earth or wet mud, they were in no position to choose.

– They had to lie down; even if Ximen Chuixue's sword was at their throats, they had to lie down.

Even if they channeled all the strength there was in the world, they couldn't have taken another step forward.

In the darkness, there seemed to be shards of phosphorescence peeking out from between trees. The phosphorescence was very weak, and one had to concentrate real hard in the darkness to be able to make it out.

So long as there was a bit of light, the phosphorescence would disappear.

"If we follow this phosphorescence, we can get out of here?"

"Mm."

"You're confident?"

"Mm." Dugu Mei was so exhausted that he couldn't even speak, but he had to reply, because he knew Lu Xiaofeng would persist in his questions. "I am very confident." He continued, panting: "So long as you have a contract with them, they won't sell you out."

"Who are they?" Lu Xiaofeng asked again. "Are they from the Mansion?"

"Mm."

"What Mansion is this? Where is it?" Lu Xiaofeng persisted. "What sort of contract do you have with them?"

Dugu Mei didn't answer; from his breathing, he seemed to have fallen asleep.

Regardless of whether he was asleep, he seemed determined not to answer any more such questions.

Lu Xiaofeng too felt that he'd asked one too many questions, so he closed his mouth and wanted to get some shuteye.

But he just couldn't fall asleep.

In the distance, the phosphorescence flickered, so near yet so far.

His pupils were so tired that they couldn't even differentiate far and near, so why couldn't he sleep?

– Only in absolute darkness could one differentiate these guiding signals; had firelight been used, it would not have been seen, much less in daytime.

– Perhaps even Ximen Chuixue would not be able to figure this out, so he would not be travelling in this sort of absolute darkness.

– It looked as if the Mansion people were very clever, they had planned everything to the last detail.

– Will Dugu Mei really lead me to the Mansion?

– He has a contract, but I don't. Would the Mansion accept me if I went there?

– Is that place really safe and isolated? So secluded that even Ximen Chuixue wouldn't be able to find me?

– Why can only dead people go there?

Lu Xiaofeng couldn't sleep, he had so many unanswered questions in his mind.

Absolute darkness meant absolute peace.

Dugu Mei's breathing had evened out gradually, and it even sounded a little like music in the darkness.

"Little girl carrying a clay doll,
Came to the garden to admire the flowers,
The doll cried for mama,
And the birds in the trees burst out laughing..."[1]

Lu Xiaofeng didn't know why, but the old man's breathing had stirred his memory of a childhood song.

He found it pretty funny too, but he didn't laugh out loud, because suddenly a ghastly shriek pierced the darkness.

Then he heard a body bounce up and flop down heavily on the muddy ground.

"Is that you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked hoarsely.

No answer.

After a long while, there came the sounds of Dugu Mei's moaning, as though he was hurt.

Who had attacked him in the night?

Lu Xiaofeng could feel his heartbeat quicken, his throat dry, and his palms perspire; in this darkness where he couldn't even see his fingers if he stretched them out, he could make out nothing.

Again after a long while, he heard Dugu Mei's faint voice: "Snake... poisonous snake."

Lu Xiaofeng let out a relieved sigh, asked: "How did you know it was a poisonous snake?"

Dugu Mei replied: "The area where it bit me doesn't hurt, only numb."

"Where's the wound?"

"On my left shoulder."

Lu Xiaofeng fumbled about and found his left shoulder, then ripped apart his clothes. His fingers found a swollen lump of flesh, and he bent his head, opened his mouth and began to suck until Dugu Mei yelped.

"You're feeling the pain?"

"Yes."

Since he could feel pain, that meant the poison in the wound was all sucked out.

Lu Xiaofeng spat out a breath and said: "If you can sleep, rest for a while. If not, just endure for a little more, it will be daylight soon."

Dugu Mei lay there whimpering. After another long while, he suddenly said: "You didn't have to do this."

"Oh?"

"You know the way out, why didn't you abandon me and go off?"

Lu Xiaofeng was quiet for a long moment before he replied: "That's because you can still laugh."

Dugu Mei didn't understand.

"I feel," Lu Xiaofeng continued slowly, "that if a person can still laugh, he cannot be considered to have no regard for others."

Once daylight came, the guiding phosphorescence would disappear.

Now it was almost light, and Lu Xiaofeng had finally gotten some rest.

Certain people possessed strength that was like the wildfire of the grasslands, it could be reignited at any time.

Lu Xiaofeng was such a person.

He had not yet exhausted the strength he had built up again when they found that they were finally out of that man-eating forest!

In front of them was a lovely spring day, the sun had just risen from the verdant mountains and a light breeze blew along the fragrance of new blooms and shoots. Dew drops sparkled like a lover's eyes under the sun's rays.

Lu Xiaofeng rubbed his eyes, unable to believe all this was real. This was a miracle, a dream.

Had he just woken up from a nightmare and gone into another dreamscape?

Dugu Mei, whom he was carrying on his back, suddenly asked, his breathing quickening: "Is there a large pine tree in front?"

There was.

An old pine tree, standing proudly erect and all alone in front of the rocks, far away from this dense forest, as though it did not care to be associated with other ordinary trees.

"Is there a big piece of stone underneath the tree?"

There was.

It was a slab of green stone as large as a table, the quality of it pure and beautiful, tender and smooth as jade.

Lu Xiaofeng crossed over and sat down on the stone, then sat down the man on his back and expelled a long breath. "We've finally made it out."

"This place isn't really considered safe yet," Dugu Mei replied, panting.

"At least I wasn't eaten alive in that man-eating forest," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"But you could still die by Ximen Chuixue's sword anytime!"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "Can't you say something nicer for once?"

Dugu Mei smiled, said: "I only want to tell you one thing."

Lu Xiaofeng was listening.

"There was no one in the world who could have saved you, but you saved yourself instead."

"Oh?"

"When you saved me just now," Dugu Mei said, "you saved yourself at the same time."

"You didn't really want to take me to that Mansion, did you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Dugu Mei nodded. "But I've changed my mind," he said, "because even though I don't care a hoot for anyone, I'm still human."

He gazed at Lu Xiaofeng, and the cunning look in his eyes suddenly turned tender. "You didn't desert me even in those circumstances, so now I won't abandon you either."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled.

There is always a kind side to human nature, of that he was always confident.

There was a smaller slab of green stone beneath the branches, and Dugu Mei said: "Go move that stone and see if there's a chest under that."

There was.

Made of rattan, the chest contained a piece of cured meat, chicken, a flask of wine, a packet of medicine for knife wounds, a whistle and a letter.

The whistle was oddly-shaped, the color of the letter and its envelope were also strange, like a dead man's skin.

There were only ten words on the letter: "Blow the whistle, listen for the echoes, follow the sounds."

Lu Xiaofeng took a swallow of wine. "Good wine."

He gave a satisfied sigh and said: "These people are really thoughtful."

Dugu Mei said: "They do things down to the finest detail and their reputation is stellar. Once you have a contract with them, they will ensure you get to the Mansion."

"What contract?" Lu Xiaofeng couldn't resist asking.

"Contract to save your life," Dugu Mei replied.

He didn't evade Lu Xiaofeng's question this time, so Lu Xiaofeng immediately asked: "What Mansion?"

"Mansion of Spirits."

Mansion of Spirits!

– Only dead people could go there!

Lu Xiaofeng could feel his palms turning cold, but couldn't resist asking: "Don't tell me that place is full of dead people's spirits?"

Dugu Mei smiled mysteriously and replied slowly: "Precisely because all the dead people's spirits are there, no living person can find it, and no

living person dares to go in!"

"What about you?" Lu Xiaofeng queried.

Dugu Mei's smile grew even more mysterious. "I am at a dead end, of course I'm bound to die."

"Since you had to die, of course you're already a dead person!"

"Now you finally understand," Dugu Mei said.

"I don't," Lu Xiaofeng gave a forced smile. "I don't understand at all."

The whistle was in his hand. He couldn't resist blowing it gently, and a strange, keen sound pierced the air, startling even him.

Just at this moment, the same whistling sound floated over the distance, as though from the west!

It was not difficult to distinguish whistle sounds in the vast loneliness of the mountains. They followed the sounds, forwards and upwards; all around them mist swirled and eventually they found themselves amongst clouds.

After a good amount of wine and half a chicken, Lu Xiaofeng was full of energy and felt he could go on and on.

Dugu Mei's condition, however, worsened and Lu Xiaofeng could smell the stench emitting from his wound. But Lu Xiaofeng didn't mind at all.

"Ximen Chuixue isn't deaf."

"Of course not."

"He would have heard the whistle sounds."

"Mm."

"So he could be upon us anytime."

"Probably."

"Since you know the way into the mountain, you'd best put me down." Dugu Mei's face was twisted with pain. "You'd make better progress alone. I can't make it; even if I reach there, I probably wouldn't live much longer."

His were sincere words, but Lu Xiaofeng didn't seem to have heard a single word.

He moved even faster; the clouds were suddenly at his feet, and the clouds in his mind dissipated.

Ahead, the sky was clear and the mountains stretched on as though in a

beautiful painting.

But Lu Xiaofeng's heart plummeted.

In front of him was a bottomless abyss; he was looking at those picturesque mountains, but there was no way to bridge the gap between them.

He picked up a stone and tossed it into the abyss, but couldn't hear the slightest hint of an echo.

Below, clouds swirled around and nothing could be seen, not even souls of dead people.

Could it be that the Mansion of Spirits was located down in that deep gully?

Lu Xiaofeng gave a forced smile and said: "It doesn't seem that difficult to get to the Mansion of Spirits. You only have to jump off from here and you'd instantly be a dead person."

Dugu Mei panted and said: "Try blowing the whistle again?"

The keen sound of the whistle sliced through the loneliness and the clouds.

Suddenly, someone appeared among the clouds.

There were white clouds both in the sky and in the abyss, and this person was just there among the clouds, as though suspended in mid-air.

Who had the ability to stand on the clouds like that?

A dead person? The soul of a dead person?

Lu Xiaofeng expelled a breath, then realised this person was moving very quickly, as though riding with the wind. In the blink of an eye, one could tell the colour of his clothes and should be able to discern his features.

But he had no features or facial outline, it was as though someone had pared off his face with a knife.

If one had not seen him in person, one could not have imagined what kind of face that was.

Lu Xiaofeng was no coward, but when he saw that face, he could feel his legs turning into jelly and nearly fell into the bottomless abyss below.

He could feel Dugu Mei, who was on his back, trembling as well; at this moment, the person had arrived in front of them all too quickly.

Although this person had leapt up the mountain, when he moved his body still seemed to be floating and his feet were at least half a foot off the ground.

Lu Xiaofeng had always thought that the three most skilled martial artists in qinggong were Sikong Zhaixing, Ximen Chuixue and himself.

Now he knew he was wrong.

This person's qinggong skills were strange, just like his face; unless you saw it for yourself, you could not have imagined it.

Now he was gazing at Lu Xiaofeng, his eyes resembling volcanic vents that had just recently spouted lava, scorching hot and dangerous.

Lu Xiaofeng had no idea what he was going to say to such a person.

Dugu Mei suddenly asked: "Are you the Soul Collector of the Mansion?" He saw this man nod and immediately continued: "I'm Dugu Mei, my soul is already here."

This person finally opened his mouth: "I know, I knew you would come."

His voice was slow, strange and constricted, because he had no lips.

People who had not seen him could not have imagined what it was like to speak for someone with no lips.

Dugu Mei didn't even dare to look at him, for fear that he would vomit.

The Soul Collector suddenly laughed coldly: "You don't dare to look at

me? Is it because I'm too ugly?"

"Of course not..." Dugu Mei immediately denied with a forced smile.

"If that's not the case, then look at my face when you talk to me," the Soul Collector said.

Dugu Mei had no choice but to look at his face, but he didn't open his mouth because his throat and stomach had constricted out of fear, and no sound came out.

The Soul Collector was laughing instead, it seemed he enjoyed seeing people frightened and in pain, enjoyed having people be afraid of him.

But his laughter ended soon enough as he said coldly: "You should have come alone, why are there two of you now?"

Dugu Mei still couldn't open his mouth, so he was unable to answer the question.

"You stay, he goes!" said the Soul Collector.

Dugu Mei suddenly gathered up his courage and replied: "He can't go either."

"If he doesn't go, you go."

"I have a contract," Dugu Mei protested loudly. "It's a contract that you guys made."

"You have a contract, he doesn't," the Soul Collector said.

Dugu Mei said: "He's my friend, I can pay the contract price for him."

"Pay now."

"I can pay it anytime," Dugu Mei said. "I have..."

The Soul Collector interrupted him coldly: "Even if you pay now, it's too late."

"Why?" Dugu Mei asked.

"Because I say so."

"But since he's here, he surely can't go back alive," Dugu Mei argued.

"If you want to save him, you go and leave him here," the Soul Collector replied coldly.

He had no lips and his voice sounded as though it'd come from hell, where it'd been refined by demonic fire.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly spoke up loudly: "I go."

He set Dugu Mei down gently, patted his clothes and, true to his word, walked off.

Dugu Mei was still panting, and suddenly grabbed the edge of his clothes, said: "You stay, I go."

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled. "You don't have to worry. I made it here in one piece, so I can get back out alive too."

Dugu Mei laughed too and said loudly: "I know you aren't concerned about life and death, but I'm really afraid of dying..."

"But you aren't any longer," Lu Xiaofeng finished for him.

Dug Mei nodded. "Because I..."

"Because you won't live long anyway, so you want to let me have the opportunity instead," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"This is the only chance," Dugu Mei said.

"I've heard all these already, and I understand your intention, but..."

"You still won't?"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled and said: "I'm very satisfied to have made friends

with someone who doesn't give a damn about kinship. Unfortunately, I don't have a habit of wanting my friends to die on my behalf."

"You are bent on leaving?" Dugu Mei asked.

"I definitely can leave quicker than you," Lu Xiaofeng said.

The Soul Collector gazed coldly at them, his eyes filled with indescribable hatred.

He abhorred friendship, hated all things good and beautiful, just like the bats that detested sunlight.

Suddenly, a voice called out in the distance: "Bring them in, both of them."

The clear, crisp sound came from somewhere in the white clouds, and there suddenly appeared among the clouds a pale red shadow, also seemingly suspended in mid-air and waving them over.

"Who said to bring them inside?"

"Old Sabre Honcho[2]."

These words were like an incantation, and Lu Xiaofeng was suddenly transported into another world.

No one could hang suspended in mid-air, and no one could really travel with the wind.

The Soul Collector was also human, not a ghost or spirit, so how had he come?

After Lu Xiaofeng crossed over, he realized that hidden among the clouds was a very thick steel cable that served as a link between the cliffs.

This was their bridge.

The bridge from the mundane world to the 'Spiritual' entrance.

On this side of the cliff was a big bamboo basket, attached to a pulley that was hooked on the steel cable.

The cliff on this side was higher, and once one of the ropes was released, the bamboo basket would slide over to the other side of the mountain.

Dugu Mei was already in the bamboo basket.

The Soul Collector gazed coldly at Lu Xiaofeng and said: "Are you thinking of getting in there too?"

"I have legs," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"If you slip and fall down there, you won't have any more legs," the Soul Collector said.

"I can see that."

"You won't have either soul or corpse; once you fall in there, you'll be turned into minced meat."

"I can imagine," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"This cable is very slippery," the Soul Collector said. "The wind up here is very strong, and no matter how good one's qinggong skills are, there's always the possibility of falling down."

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled. "You've fallen down there before?"

"No."

"You like me?"

The Soul Collector laughed coldly.

Lu Xiaofeng said lightly: "Since you haven't fallen in, how would you know that I would? Since you don't like me, why would you care whether I lived or died?"

"Fine," the Soul Collector said frostily, "you go first."

"You want to walk behind me and watch me fall?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"There are plenty of chances like that, and I don't like to miss them," the Soul Collector said.

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled again. "But this time, I promise you will be disappointed."

The steel cable was indeed very slippery and the mountain wind was very strong. One was like a hapless candle flame walking on the cable in such circumstances.

There were misty clouds drifting around them, and the world seemed to be floating, so it was difficult to get a firm footing on the cable.

But the more difficult the task, the more enjoyable it was to Lu Xiaofeng.

He wasn't walking very quickly, because it was easier to be fast rather than slow; he walked slowly, as though treading on a flat, broad road.

The Soul Collector could only follow behind.

So Lu Xiaofeng was in great spirits.

Wind breezed past beneath his trousers, clouds flew by in front of his eyes, and he suddenly felt that there was nothing in the world worth

troubling over. Even if he slipped and fell, he didn't care.

His voice was normally very rough and he couldn't carry a tune, so he'd stopped singing after he turned nine.

However, he suddenly felt like bursting into song and actually began singing a children's song, because he only knew children's songs:

"Little girl carrying a clay doll,
Came to the garden to admire the flowers..."

A sudden whoosh of wind over his head, and a man was standing in front of him.

A man without a face.

Lu Xiaofeng grinned. "Is my singing nice?"

The Soul Collector said coldly: "That's not singing. That's a donkey braying."

Lu Xiaofeng roared with laughter. "So there are times when you get fed up too. Great. Fantastic."

He began singing again, his voice even louder.

"The doll cried for mama,

And the birds in the trees burst out laughing..."

The Soul Collector stared at him frostily. When the singing was over, he asked: "Are you Lu Xiaofeng?"

"You mean you can recognise me from my singing?" Lu Xiaofeng asked. "Don't tell me my voice is more famous than my own self?"

"You're really Lu Xiaofeng?" the Soul Collector persisted.

"Other than Lu Xiaofeng, who else could sing like that?"

"Know who I am?"

"No." He smiled again. "There are many people in this world who don't want face, but none who have done it as completely as you."

The Soul Collector's eyes seemed to blaze up again; suddenly he removed a black wooden hairpin from his hair and threw it at Lu Xiaofeng.

There was nothing extraordinary about his strike, but it was too fast, so fast that it was beyond imagination.

Lu Xiaofeng had no time to retreat or dodge; he could only stretch out his hand and catch it with two fingers!

This was originally an infallible strike, but this time it had failed.

An ordinary black wooden hairpin seemed to have split into two, quick as lightning they were about to pierce his eyes.

Had he been on flat ground, he could of course have dodged, but he was standing on a slippery cable right now and not on stable ground.

His body tilted and he lost his footing. He dropped down, right into that bottomless pit below.

– One fall and he'd become minced meat.

He did not become minced meat.

The Soul Collector inclined his head downwards and saw a foot hanging on the steel cable. Lu Xiaofeng was just like a fish being strung up on the fishing rod, swaying with the wind.

He seemed as don't-care as ever, even amused, and started singing again:

"Rock-a-bye baby,
Rocking to grandma's bridge,
Grandma called me a good baby..."

He didn't carry on, because he'd forgotten the rest of the lyrics.

"Looks like you're really Lu Xiaofeng," the Soul Collector said.

"I still am now," Lu Xiaofeng replied. "But maybe I'd become a pile of minced meat later on."

"You're really not afraid of death?" the Soul Collector asked.

A "whooshing" sound and like the turning of a pinwheel, he was suddenly upright again on the steel cable, smiling as he said: "Looks like you don't really want me to die either."

The Soul Collector said coldly: "I just want you to know one thing."

"What thing?"

The fire was back in the Soul Collector's eyes as he bit out: "I want you to know, Ximen Chuixue is not the fastest sword in the world. I am quicker than he."

This time, Lu Xiaofeng did not laugh and an odd expression entered his eyes as he gazed at the other and asked: "Who exactly are you?"

"Someone who doesn't want face," the Soul Collector said.

He didn't want face and had no face either. He was devoid of expression, but there seemed to be indescribable grief in his voice.

Lu Xiaofeng was about to press further, but he'd already darted off like a bird and in a flash, disappeared among the white clouds.

The misty clouds swirled about and Lu Xiaofeng stood stupidly among them, his thoughts uncertain.

After a long while, he began walking forward again and finally reached the other side. He saw in front of him two bamboo poles and a red string tied between them. In the distance, a cold voice said: "Once you cross this life-death line, you are a dead man." The voice was as chilly as the tip of a knife: "So you'd better think again: should you cross over or go back?"

Lu Xiaofeng was also asking himself that: "Should I cross over or go back?"

Once he was over the line he'd be a dead man, but if he turned back it'd be a dead end too.

This line would probably break when touched, but how many could actually cross over?

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly laughed. "There were times when I felt like dying every day but I couldn't; I didn't expect that today it'd be so easy to die."

He smiled and easily crossed over, walked into a world he'd never expected.

Into a dead person's world.

It was hazy all around and nothing could be seen, not even the Soul Collector, who'd disappeared to god knows where.

Dugu Mei was gone too.

- What sort of a place was this?
- Am I really a dead person now?

Lu Xiaofeng heaved his chest and strode ahead, bursting into song again:

"Little girl carrying a clay doll,
Came to the garden to admire the flowers..."

He hadn't yet finished the line when he heard a voice moaning: "Please, spare me."

[1] This is a very common children's song, here are the Chinese lyrics (complete with pinyin):

"妹妹背着泥娃娃, (mei1 mei1 bei4 zhe ni2 wa2 wa)
走到花园来看花, (zou3 dao4 hua1 yuan2 lai2 kan4 hua1)
娃娃哭了叫妈妈, (wa2 wa ku1 le jiao4 ma1 ma1)
树上的小鸟笑哈哈....." (shu4 shang4 de xiao3 niao3 xiao4 ha1 ha1)

[2] Old Sabre Honcho was named in the spirit of "Ancient Pine Hermit" Obviously it's a pseudonym. The Chinese title is 老刀把子 (lao3 dao1 ba3

zi).

Chapter 4 – Mansion of Spirits[1]

Translated by Junny

The sound came from a small wooden hut.

One must be very observant to pick out a small greyish-white wooden hut among all that fog-like clouds.

Lu Xiaofeng finally saw it – only the hut, but no person.

The moaning hadn't stopped, and Lu Xiaofeng couldn't help asking: "Are you hurt?"

"Not hurt, but dying soon." It was a young lady's voice: "Dying from your singing."

"Since you're here, you must be a dead person too, so what's the harm in dying again?"

"Not even a living ghost can take your singing, what more dead people?"

Lu Xiaofeng roared with laughter.

From the hut, the voice asked again: "Do you know who saved you just now?"

"It was you?"

"That's correct, it's me." Her laughter was very sweet. "My surname is Ye, I'm Ye Ling. Every one calls me Little Leaf[2]."

"Good name."

"Your name isn't too bad, but I don't understand how a big man like you is called little phoenix?"

Lu Xiaofeng's laughter became forced as he said: "My name is Lu Xiaofeng, not little phoenix."

"What's the difference?" Ye Ling asked.

"Phoenixes (feng huang) come in pairs – 'feng' refers to the male, while 'huang' refers to the female'."

He crossed over slowly, but silence suddenly filled the hut. After a long while, he could hear Ye Ling sigh gently: "I'm just a little leaf and not part of a pair, don't even know whether it's male or female."

Lu Xiaofeng said: "That you don't have to worry. I only need to take one look at you to know whether you're male or female."

He thrust the door open suddenly and burst into the hut.

From the outside, this hut already seemed small and miserable, and it was like walking into a dove's cage.

However, doves despite their size had everything necessary and this hut was no different. It had seemingly everything that could be found in other houses, even a golden night stool.

Lu Xiaofeng was not someone overly interested in night stools, but he noticed this one because when he walked in, this young lady dressed in red was sitting on it.

Neatly dressed and sitting on the night stool, she was gazing at Lu Xiaofeng with large black eyes.

Lu Xiaofeng could feel his face turning a little red.

No matter the circumstances, men should not force their way in when a girl is sitting on the night stool.

Still he'd come in and wouldn't it be more embarrassing if he'd slipped out now?

Lu Xiaofeng decided to take the offensive and suddenly smiled. "Do you always sit on night stools to greet your visitors?"

Ye Ling shook her head primly. "I'd only do that in two situations."

The first situation didn't need elaborating, of course, but what about the other one?

Ye Ling said: "That's when something is trying to wiggle out of the night stool."

Lu Xiaofeng almost lost his smile.

Would there still be something wanting to get out of the night stool? Other than a horrible stench, what else could come out?

"Do you want to have a look at what's inside?" Ye Ling asked.

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head immediately. "No."

"You still have to look even if you don't want to," Ye Ling said.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because everything in here is for you," Ye Ling replied.

"Even if I don't want them?"

"Of course."

As he watched her stand up and lift the lid from the night stool, Lu Xiaofeng almost wanted to bolt out the door and flee.

He didn't flee.

Not only was the smell from the night stool not horrible, it was rather fragrant.

Following the fragrant aroma were a pair of swallows and a pair of butterflies.

The swallows and butterflies flew out of the little window and Ye Ling, as though performing some magic tricks, retrieved a new set of attire from the night stool, a pair of soft socks, a small jar of wine, two wine cups, two pairs of chopsticks, a large earthen jar, a large spoon, four or five buns and a bouquet of fresh flowers.

Lu Xiaofeng was stunned.

Nobody could have imagined that so many things could be retrieved from a night stool.

Ye Ling said: "The swallows and butterflies are our welcome to you, the clothes and socks should fit you, the wine is vintage 'zhuyeqing'[3], the earthen jar contains flavored braised chicken and the buns are freshly steamed."

She raised her head and gazed at Lu Xiaofeng, continued lightly: "Do you like them?"

Lu Xiaofeng expelled a breath and replied: "I totally love them."

"Do you want them?" she asked.

"If I don't, I'm an idiot."

Ye Ling smiled, like a flower, a candy, a little fox.

A fox that could harm or charm people.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at her and couldn't help another sigh, said: "You're female, definitely female."

The flowers were just put in the vase, but the wine was already in Lu Xiaofeng's tummy.

Little Leaf gazed at him pouring the cool 'zhuyeqing' down his throat as he would water, surprised and feeling that it was rather a waste. Suddenly she sighed and said: "There's just something not quite right."

Lu Xiaofeng didn't understand.

Little Leaf explained: "Someone said that very few people can match your intelligence, martial arts, drinking ability, thick-skinned and lascivious nature."

Lu Xiaofeng set down the empty wine jar and laughed. "Now you've seen my drinking ability."

"I have seen your skills too," Ye Ling said. "You didn't fall off just now, I almost wanted to take my hat off you."

"However, I'm not lascivious, so that's wrong," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"That's not wrong," Ye Ling said.

Lu Xiaofeng was angry. "Have I ever been improper towards you?"

"No, until now no," Ye Ling said. "But when you look at me, your eyes..."

Lu Xiaofeng hurriedly cut her off: "What did you say was not quite right?"

Ye Ling chuckled. "You're not very thick-skinned, you blush too."

"Did you think I've never blushed in my life?" Lu Xiaofeng said. "Do you believe everything that person tells you?"

Ye Ling batted her eyelids and countered: "Do you know who said all that?"

"Who?"

"Old Sabre Honcho."

This man, this name... why did it exert so much influence?

Lu Xiaofeng tried testing the waters: "He's the leader around here?"

"Not only that, he's our boss, our old man."

"What's he like?"

"A man who can make everyone willingly regard him as their old man, what kind of a person do you think he is?"

"I don't know," Lu Xiaofeng said. "I haven't got anyone who wants to be my son, and I've never wanted to be someone else's son."

"You just want to know his name and background, that's all," Ye Ling said.

Lu Xiaofeng couldn't deny. "Of course I want to know, desperately want to know."

Ye Ling said coldly: "If you really want to know, it could cost you your life."

Her expression became very stern. "If you want to live comfortably here, don't ever sniff out anything about other people, or..."

"Or what?"

"Or you'd vanish, no matter how highly skilled you may be."

"Vanish?"

"That means you suddenly disappear without a trace, and nobody knows where you've gone!"

"Do people around here disappear often?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Frequently," Ye Ling said.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, gave a forced smile. "I thought this was a very safe and regulated place."

"This place is regulated. In fact we have three main rules."

"What are they?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"No checking out people's pasts, no offending Old Sabre Honcho, and no disobeying his orders."

"So whatever he wants me to do, I have to do it?"

Ye Ling nodded her head and said: "Even if he wants you to eat shit, you'll have to eat it."

Lu Xiaofeng's smile was forced.

"Do you know why I wanted to come here and tell you all these?" Ye Ling asked again.

Lu Xiaofeng's smile suddenly turned cheerful and said: "That's because you like me."

Ye Ling smiled too. "Looks like he wasn't wrong after all. Your skin is so thick that even the tip of a spear couldn't pierce through it."

Her smile was more beautiful than a flower and sweeter than candy, as she continued lightly: "But if you break my rules, I will skin your face off and use it to make slippers for me."

Lu Xiaofeng's smile turned forced again and said: "You should at least let me know what sort of rules you have."

"I only have two rules: don't offend Big Leaf, and don't let women into Lu Residence."

"Who is Big Leaf?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Big Leaf is Little Leaf's sister, and Lu Residence is Lu Xiaofeng's residence."

"Where's Lu Residence?"

"Right here," Ye Ling said. "From now on, this is your home. You must

sleep here at night and stay here quietly in the daytime. I will make spot-checks."

Lu Xiaofeng was laughing again, but it sounded rather odd.

Ye Ling's brows rose. "You're laughing at me?"

"Not at you, just at myself."

His laughter sounded not only strange, but a little grieved too, as he said: "I've lived thirty years, but this is the first time I have a home of my own, my own place..."

He didn't continue, because Ye Ling had shut his mouth – used her own lips to shut his mouth.

Her lips were soft and icy cold.

Their lips had barely brushed each other's before she suddenly aimed a punch at Lu Xiaofeng's tummy.

Her punch was hard and heavy.

Lu Xiaofeng was almost bent double by the blow, but she merely gurgled with laughter before slipping out.

"Remember, don't let any women in." Her voice was already outside.

“Especially not the Flower Widow.”

“And what kind of a person is the Flower Widow?”

“She’s not a person, but a female dog, a man-eating b!tch.”

Lu Xiaofeng had four eyebrows, but only two hands.

He used his left hand to massage his stomach, and his right to finger his lip – he didn’t know whether to cry or laugh.

He’d muddled through all this to find himself turned from a living person into a dead one, and now with a home to boot.

He still had his two legs, but he couldn’t go anywhere.

He was suddenly asleep and began dreaming soon after; he dreamt he was being enveloped by an icy cold giant leaf, then dreamt of a flower-covered b!tch crunching his bones, and he could hear the crunching sounds very distinctly.

Then he realized that there was indeed someone in the hut crunching bones.

Not his bones, but chicken bones.

And it wasn’t a b!tch sitting there chewing bones, but a person.

The moment Lu Xiaofeng came awake, this person was suddenly on the alert, just like the instinctive alertness of wild beasts.

He twisted his head and stared at Lu Xiaofeng, his eyes full of hostility.

But he was still gnawing at chicken bones.

Lu Xiaofeng had never seen anyone take such an interest in chicken bones, nor had he seen such a skinny person before.

In truth, the flesh on this person's body would not be any more than the meat on the chicken bones he was chewing.

However, the clothes he wore were magnificent and he definitely didn't look poor enough to have to resort to chewing chicken bones.

Lu Xiaofeng couldn't resist probing a little. "Are you ill?" he asked.

"You're the one who's sick!"

This person spat out the bones in his mouth all over the floor, revealing a row of shiny white teeth as he glared at Lu Xiaofeng.

"What illness did you think I was suffering from? Hunger?"

"You aren't hungry?"

"I eat three meals a day, sometimes supper too."

"What do you eat?"

"I eat rice, noodles, meat, vegetables... whatever is edible, I will eat it."

"So what did you eat today?"

"At noon, I had northern dishes, one was braised pork shanks, one was yellow lamb stew, one was Sanxian duck, one was fried tofu dumplings, one was prawns in black ginseng, one was five-plum pigeon, and another was a bowl of cucumber and meatball soup."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

This person glared at him again. "You don't believe me?"

"I'm merely curious why anyone would want to barge into another's home to chew chicken bones."

"Because I feel like it."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed again. "If you like, you're welcome to drop by whenever I have chicken bones here."

There was however a hint of wariness on this person's eyes as he said:

"You welcome me here? Why?"

"That's because this is the first time I have a home," Lu Xiaofeng said. "You're my new home's first guest, and I like having friends."

This person's expression grew fiercer. "I am not your friend."

"Maybe not now, but definitely in the future," Lu Xiaofeng said.

This person was still glaring at him, but seemed to have calmed down somewhat.

It couldn't be denied that Lu Xiaofeng was very good at making friends, and people generally liked him. Male or female, they were all the same.

Lu Xiaofeng had already sat up and suddenly gave a sigh and said: "It's a pity there's no more wine now, or I'd have a drink or two with you."

This person's eyes immediately shone. "There's no wine here, but can't you go outside and find some?"

"I haven't been here for more than half a day," Lu Xiaofeng said, "and I'm not familiar with the area. But I guarantee that within three days, I'd be able to find whatever you want to drink."

This person gazed at him for a long while and finally expelled a breath, his whole body relaxing. "I'm a wandering soul and may barge anytime. You really don't mind?"

"I don't mind," Lu Xiaofeng said. He really didn't.

Often, he would drag friends out in the middle of the night to drink with him, and his friends didn't mind either.

Every one knew that he would be only too happy if people came to find him in the middle of the night.

Darkness had fallen and the night breeze carried with it the sound of a bell.

"That's the dinner bell."

Lu Xiaofeng didn't understand, so the Wandering Soul explained: "The dinner bell summons every one to the hall for dinner."

"Every one must go?"

"Mm."

"Every day?"

"About four or five days a month."

"On what days?"

"On the first and fifteenth, during festivals, and when a famous person arrives here for the first day."

He gave Lu Xiaofeng the once over and said: "You must be a famous person, don't tell me you're that Lu Xiaofeng with four eyebrows?"

Lu Xiaofeng offered a forced smile. "Unfortunately the Lu Xiaofeng now is no longer the Lu Xiaofeng of yesteryear."

Wandering Soul looked about to speak but restrained himself. Suddenly he stood up. "There will be someone here soon to lead you to dinner, so I have to go. You'd best not tell anyone I have been by."

Lu Xiaofeng didn't ask why.

If someone had a favor to ask of him, he would not ask the reason so long as he was prepared to agree to it.

Just on that, he should have many friends.

Wandering Soul also seemed pleased on that score, then suddenly lowered his voice and said: "When you reach the hall tonight, they will try and scare you into submission."

"Oh?"

"At least half the people here are loonies, and their only hobby is to torture people and watch others suffer. There are six or seven who are

even more terrible.”

“Which seven?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Wandering Soul said: “One is called Housekeeper, one is General, one is Cousin, one is Hook...”

He’d only said these four names before suddenly leaping out.

The hut’s window was very small, but he managed to shimmy out by grabbing the top ledge and inserting himself through.

It looked as though his qinggong was not only very high, he could shrink himself.

These two skills were exclusively Sikong Zhaixing’s areas of expertise, so how was he related to Sikong Zhaixing?

Lu Xiaofeng didn’t think further because he’d heard footsteps outside.

The footsteps were very light, and only animals with padded paws would be able to tread so lightly.

Only very highly-skilled veterans of the martial arts fraternity would be able to walk like such beasts.

Were there so many highly-skilled martial artists in the Mansion of

Spirits?

Just when Lu Xiaofeng was still feeling shocked, he heard a knock on the door.

He really wanted to see who this person is and what he looked like. Immediately he went to open the door.

He was even more stunned.

The knocker was not a person, but really an animal with padded paws!

It was a dog!

A big black dog so shiny that he looked just like a leopard in the fading light.

But it wasn't hostile to people, as long-term, strict training had already defused its animosity towards humans.

It wasn't barking either, because it held a piece of paper in its mouth.

On the paper were these words: "Please follow me."

This dog was here to lead Lu Xiaofeng to dinner.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

No matter what, being able to eat is always a pleasant thing, especially now when he was really craving for a sumptuous, delicious dinner.

“Braised pork shanks, yellow lamb stew, Sanxian duck...”

When he recalled the names of these lovely dishes Wandering Soul mentioned, he almost started salivating.

The dog was waving its tail at him and he patted its head, smiling. “You know, I’d rather you guide me around, because the dogs here are definitely more adorable than the humans.”

It was night but the fog had not dissipated. There were flickering lights in the distance, but they merely served to make the darkness even darker.

The dog was walking ahead with Lu Xiaofeng following. When his eyes finally adjusted to the darkness, he realized he was walking on a winding path.

On either side of the path were trees of varying types and some unknown flora.

In the daytime, this must have been a beautiful valley.

But who knows whether the sun’s rays would chance to shine here?

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly found that what he truly desired wasn’t a dish of

red-hot braised pork shanks, but sunshine.

He had once been like the others, had once cursed the sunshine.

Whenever he perspired and panted under the blazing hot sun, he would feel the urge to curse the scorching rays.

But what he most wanted now was that kind of sunshine.

There are many things like that in this world, only when you lose them do you realize their value.

Lu Xiaofeng was sighing in his heart when he suddenly heard someone else sighing nearby, and a voice spoke: "Lu Xiaofeng, I knew you would come, I've been here waiting for you."

This was the Mansion of Spirits and there were possibly many spirits lurking in the darkness. This voice sounded sinister and thready like a ghost's.

Lu Xiaofeng's palms began perspiring.

He was certain the voice was nearby, but he just couldn't see anyone around.

"You can't see me," the voice began again. "When a vengeful ghost wants to take a life as repayment, it would never let itself be seen."

"I owe you a life?" Lu Xiaofeng asked cautiously.

"Mm."

"Whose life?"

"Mine."

"Who are you?"

"I'm the Blue Beard who died at your hands."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed uproariously.

When a person is truly fearful, he sometimes starts laughing for no rhyme or reason.

His laughter was loud but short.

He suddenly realized that it was not a human or ghost speaking, but the dog.

The dog, which had been walking in front of him, had turned its head and was staring at him with a pair of eyes that resembled dead fish.

"I'm the Blue Beard who died at your hands."

How could a dog utter human speech?

Could Blue Beard's ghost have possessed this dog?

No matter how brave Lu Xiaofeng might be, he still shivered. Just then, the dog lunged at him.

He made a grab for the dog's front paw, but a hand snaked out from the dog's stomach.

It was a human hand holding a knife; a raise of the hand and the knife flew out, aimed right at Lu Xiaofeng's lower abdomen.

This was a complete surprise. How many could avoid such an attack?

At least one.

Lu Xiaofeng's lower abdomen suddenly contracted as he stuck out two fingers and caught the blade neatly.

The dog, however, had somersaulted and backtracked ten meters, whereby it vanished into the darkness.

It was impossible to see anything in the darkness.

Lu Xiaofeng raised his head and gazed into the night, then looked

down at the blade he held in his hand, a forced smile on his lips.

This was supposed to be a nightmare, but it wasn't a dream.

In this dreamscape-like Mansion of Spirits, was any one thing a dream or reality? It was difficult to tell.

However, he had finally understood one thing: "The dogs here aren't really more adorable than the people."

Another voice floated over in the darkness: "So are you now finally willing to let a human guide you along?"

This time, he actually saw a person.

He saw Ye Ling.

In the foggy light, Ye Ling was still smiling sweetly.

"Now you should understand whether the people or dogs here are more adorable."

"I don't understand."

"You still don't?"

"I only know one thing," Lu Xiaofeng said. "Sometimes the dogs here are

people, and the people here are dogs."

The Flower Widow might not be a real b!tch, but that black dog was a human.

Lu Xiaofeng continued: "Although few in the martial arts world are willing to be dogs, there is only one who can actually do it to a T."

"You know who that is?" Ye Ling asked.

"Mister Dog."

"You already knew?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said: "I at least know that Blue Beard did not die by my hand. He knew that too, so even if he turned into a vengeful ghost, he wouldn't come after me."

Ye Ling laughed, batting her eyelids. "Even if vengeful ghosts don't come after you, hungry ones would."

"Hungry ghosts?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"That means the people who will die of hunger while waiting for you to turn up for dinner," Ye Ling said. "If you don't hurry over, there will be thirty-seven hungry ghosts tonight."

“Even if I don’t go, there will only be one hungry ghost.”

“Who?”

“Me.”

[1] The title for this chapter (in my book, that is) is "Ye Guhong's Suicide" but there are some sites that have labelled it as "Mansion of Spirits", which is more reflective of the chapter's contents if you read on, and is what I will use here.

[2] Ye Ling - written as 叶灵, the character 叶 (Ye) is the same whether it is used as a surname or for the word "leaf".

[3] zhuyeqing - 竹叶青, a kind of tea leaf. Can be used to make tea and wine, which is what Lu Xiaofeng drinks here.

Chapter 5 – No words to describe a painful situation

Translated by Junny

Yesterday was Hook's seventieth birthday, and as he awoke today with a hangover, he suffered a splitting headache and rush of sexual adrenaline.

The first symptom indicated that he was already old.

Yesterday he'd only drunk forty jin of Shaoxing wine, but today his head hurt so much that he longed to take a sabre to it and split it apart.

Ten years ago, he'd had the record of downing eighty jin of Shaoxing wine in one night, and still be full of energy after four to six hours of rest; with one hand, he'd been able to snap the throats of twenty three of the thirty six Taixing Friends.

When he thought of that, he was full of hatred, hating heaven and earth, hating himself – why does a person like me have to grow old?

However, when he realized the second symptom, he felt comforted; at least one part of his anatomy was as rock-hard as the hook inserted up his right wrist.

How many seventy-year-olds could be as strong as he?

A pity there were very few women here, and even fewer who could catch his fancy.

In truth, there were only three he was attracted to, and these three

damn women always enjoyed leading him along on purpose.

Especially that naughty and coy little fox, who had already promised him thrice to come to his room and made him wait in vain for three nights.

When he thought of that, he felt even angrier and wished he could grab that little fox right now and press her firmly down on the bed.

Thinking like this made him swell painfully; if he didn't get some form of release today, he might die of suppression.

He was still entertaining thoughts of that little fox with her sweet smiles, and her cold as frost sister, along with that over-ripe Flower Widow...

He was about to stretch out his hand when suddenly someone knocked insistently on the door.

Only two or three people dared to knock on his door like this, it was either Housekeeper or Cousin.

Even though these two were his buddies, he still couldn't help feeling rage well up within him.

When sexual desire is interrupted, it often turns into rage.

He pulled a thin blanket over himself and growled in a low voice:

"Come in!"

Hands behind his back, Cousin stood outside the door, his shiny, fair-skinned face looking just like a freshly shelled egg.

Nobody could guess his age upon seeing that face.

He was always very proud of this point, sometimes even he forgot about his own age.

Hearing Hook's angry growl, he just knew that this old bugger was experiencing stirrings of love.

With a smile, he pushed open the door and walked in. Seeing that hint of a bulge beneath the blanket, he grinned and said: "Looks like you're in good shape today, should I pluck two leaves for you?"

"Shut your thieving eyes and stinky mouth," Hook roared. "If I want to find girls, I'll find them myself."

"How many have you found?" Cousin asked.

Hook was even angrier as he leapt up and dashed over to Cousin and pressed the hook of his right hand up Cousin's belly. Gnashing his teeth, he said: "Say one more word and I'll rip your heart and intestines out."

Cousin was not in the least afraid as he laughed merrily. "I'm not annoying you, in fact I want to cure your illness. See, you've gone all soft."

Hook glared at him, but suddenly roared with laughter and released his hold. "You don't have to get cocky either. Were it not for the men here outnumbering the women, your illness would be worse than mine."

Cousin crossed over slowly and sat down in a chair by the window, said leisurely: "It's a pity the number of men here is decreasing, there's only maybe one who has caught my eye."

"Would that be General?" Hook asked.

Cousin gave a cold laugh and shook his head. "He's too old."

"Is it Xiao Qing?"

"He's got the looks but no substance."

"Don't tell me it's Housekeeper?"

Cousin laughed again and said: "He's an old lady himself. I'd be grateful if he leaves me alone."

"So whom exactly are you referring to?"

"Lu Xiaofeng."

"Lu Xiaofeng?" Hook yelped. "That Lu Xiaofeng with four eyebrows?"

Cousin narrowed his eyes and smiled. "Other than him, who else could tempt me?"

"How did he end up here?"

"It seems it's because he had an affair with Ximen Chuixue's wife."

"Have you seen?" Hook asked.

"Only stole a few glances."

"What is he like?"

Cousin's eyes narrowed again and he said: "Of course he's a real man, the cream of the crop."

Hook had just sat down but he stood up again and walked barefoot to the window.

Outside, it was foggy and desolate.

Suddenly he turned his head around and stared at Cousin, said: "I want to kill him!"

Cousin jumped up too. "What did you say?"

"I said I want to kill him."

"You want to kill people just because you've got no women?"

Hook's fists clenched as he said: "He's probably only thirty or thereabouts this year; I'm already seventy, but I'm confident I can definitely kill him!"

Seeing the expression on his face, anyone could tell his desire to shed blood was not only because he wanted to vent his anger, he also wanted to prove he was still young.

– This is most probably the reason why many old men desire young girls.

– However, they have forgotten something: youth may be glorious, but old age has its fun side too.

A Western sage once said something that the elderly should take note:

– The passing of years is not a gradual process of decline; rather it is the fall from one plain to another. This might upset some, but when we stand up and realize that our bones are not broken and before our eyes is yet another splendid new world, with many wonders still for us to explore, might this not also be a beautiful thing?

Hook, of course, had not heard of this, and neither had Cousin.

He gazed at Hook's expression and finally sighed, saying: "Fine, I'll help you kill him, but you have to help me do him first."

"Fine!" said Hook.

Suddenly, they heard someone laughing coldly from outside the door. "That's all well and good, but a pity that both of you are too late."

Following the laughter in was a tall, thin hunchbacked man with an eagle nose.

Cousin sighed again. "I just knew that you, Housekeeper, would come and poke your nose into our business."

"I'm merely here to relay some news," Housekeeper said.

"What news?" Hook cut in.

"That black dog has already gone to find Lu Xiaofeng, so even if he doesn't succeed, there's still General."

Cousin was startled. "What has General prepared?"

"He's prepared a Hongmen banquet[1] and is waiting for Lu Xiaofeng," Housekeeper said.

The night was still the same, as were the fog and mountain valley.

But Lu Xiaofeng was feeling differently.

Strolling side by side with a sweet and intelligent girl was definitely more pleasant than following behind a dog.

Ye Ling glanced sideways at Lu Xiaofeng. "You seem happy."

"At least I'm happier than just now," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Because you know I won't bite you?" Ye Ling asked.

"You're also prettier than that dog," Lu Xiaofeng said. "Prettier than any dog."

Ye Ling laughed sweetly. "Am I only that little bit better?"

"Of course there are other merits," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Such as?"

"You can talk. I enjoy listening to you talk."

Ye Ling batted her eyelids and said: "What do you like me to talk about? The secrets of this place?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

One could attribute many meanings to his laughter, but denial was not part of it.

"Where do you want to start?" Ye Ling asked.

"How about we start from Hook?"

Ye Ling's eyes widened and she stared at him in shock. "You know about Hook? How did you know?"

"Not only do I know of Hook, I also know of General, Cousin and Housekeeper," Lu Xiaofeng replied leisurely.

Ye Ling crossed over to pluck a leaf from the tree and returned, then suddenly sighed and said: "You know too much. However, if you must ask, I can still tell you."

"Then you'd better start from Hook," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"He's a murderous one, and also a lusty wolf. The thing he most wants to do is to rip my pants apart and press me down on the bed."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said: "Actually, you didn't have to be so honest."

Ye Ling widened those innocent eyes of hers and said: "I've always been an honest woman, and it so happens also one who understands men the best."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed again and gave a forced smile. "What a coincidence, but I don't want to hear how many men want to rip off your pants."

Ye Ling batted her eyes and said: "If someone wants you to take off your trousers, would you want to listen?"

"That's a pretty common thing," Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "Not the first time I've encountered that."

"If the person who wants you to take off your trousers is a man?"

"A man?" Lu Xiaofeng yelped.

Ye Ling said sweetly: "I was wrong. It's not one man, it's two."

Lu Xiaofeng couldn't even yell out. Only after a long while did he dare to ask: "Are they Cousin and Housekeeper?"

Ye Ling's eyes widened again. "How did you know?"

Lu Xiaofeng gave a forced smile. "These two names sound rather perverse."

"But the most frightening one isn't either of them."

"Oh?"

"Have you seen anyone who could tear apart a live bull into half?" Ye Ling asked.

"No," Lu Xiaofeng shook his head immediately.

"Have you seen anyone shatter someone's brains with just a mere finger?"

"No."

"Well, you'll see that soon."

Lu Xiaofeng swallowed hard. "Do you mean General?"

"That's right," Ye Ling replied.

"He's waiting for me too?"

"Not only that, but he's getting annoyed at having waited for so long, so you'd better go find a huge pot first."

"What do I need a pot for?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"To cover your head."

General was standing on the high dais.

He stood at eight feet ten inches, weighed one hundred and seventy three jin, had broad shoulders and a deep chest, along with thighs thick as tree trunks. When he stretched his palms out, they were as large as palm-leaf fans. The calluses on his palms were over an inch thick, no matter how sharp the weapon, once in his hand he'd snap it instantly!

There was indeed a huge steel pot in front of him!

The steel pot rested on a stove, which was on the dais in the great hall.

The height of the great hall was 13.4 meters, while the dais' height measured at seven feet, and over three feet for that of the steel pot.

The fire in the stove was burning merrily as meat cooked in the huge pot, its aroma was so fragrant that man and dog within a ten-mile radius would be attracted over.

When Lu Xiaofeng walked in, General was using a big wooden ladle to stir the meat in the pot.

He set down the ladle the moment he saw Lu Xiaofeng, glared at the latter and roared: "Lu Xiaofeng."

The roar was like a thunderbolt from the sky, but Lu Xiaofeng didn't even bat an eyelid and roared back: "General?"

"Are you coming or not?" General asked.

"I come," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

He really walked over, his strides larger than usual.

General glared at him and said: "There's meat in the pot."

"It's meat," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"You eat meat?"

"Yes."

"Eat a lot?"

"Lots."

"Good, you eat!"

General handed the ladle over to Lu Xiaofeng, who took a full scoop of it.

One scoop was enough to fill a bowl of meat, sizzling hot meat.

Lu Xiaofeng wasn't afraid of it being hot and finished it quickly. When he was done, he let out a breath and said: "Good meat."

"Of course it is," General said.

"You eat meat too?"

"Yes."

"You eat a lot too?"

General snatched the ladle over and helped himself to a full scoop of meat, looked upwards and roared: "Good meat."

"It is good meat," Lu Xiaofeng agreed.

"You know what meat this is?" General asked.

"No."

"You're not afraid this is human flesh?"

"I'm afraid."

"And you still want to eat it?"

"It's better to eat others than to be eaten," Lu Xiaofeng said.

General stared at him for a long time and said: "Fine, you eat!"

A scoop of meat filled a bowl, and a bowl of meat weighed one jin; Lu Xiaofeng ate another scoop.

General ate another scoop too, and he did as well.

In a short while, at least five jin of sizzling hot meat had gone down his stomach.

At the sixth scoop, General asked: "You can still continue?"

Lu Xiaofeng didn't answer, but suddenly began doing somersaults, three-hundred and sixty of them at one go, then stood up to reply: "I can still eat."

"Fine, let's continue eating," General said.

Lu Xiaofeng ate and ate, five somersaults per scoop of meat; after two thousand somersaults, he was still in good shape.

General, however, was startled. "Good somersaults."

As soon as those words were said, a splitting sound could be heard as the belt around his tummy snapped into two.

"Can you still eat?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

General didn't answer, but leapt off the high dais and seized the legs of the stove. The stove was made of raw bronze, and coupled with the steel pot on the stove, must have weighed at least five hundred to seven hundred jin!

He lifted it with just one hand, set it down, then lifted it, for a total of three hundred and sixty times before he set it down. Then he snatched over the ladle and said fiercely: "Watch."

This time, he ate two scoops.

Lu Xiaofeng gazed at the ladle in his hand, seemingly dazed, but suddenly also seized the stove and raised it, then put it down for three hundred and sixty times, grabbed the ladle and ate two scoops of meat.

General's eyes were stunned.

"More?" Lu Xiaofeng panted.

General gritted his teeth. "More!"

He took the ladle and shoved scoop by scoop down his throat, and again there was a clattering sound. This time it wasn't his belt, but that the ladle had reached the bottom of the pot.

A scoop of meat was equivalent to one jin, and a pot of meat had at least thirty to fifty scoops, all swept clean by the both of them.

Lu Xiaofeng expelled a long breath as he smoothed over his protruding belly and said: "Good meat."

"Of course it is," General said.

"Although, no meat is better than having meat," Lu Xiaofeng said.

General glared at him, but suddenly laughed loudly. "Much better."

Both of them roared with laughter and suddenly fell down together, stretched out on the stone dais and still laughing.

There were still people standing below the dais, all with wide eyes and open mouths as they gazed at each other, unable to say anything.

Suddenly General said: "Your tummy hasn't burst?"

"No," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Couldn't tell that such a small tummy could hold so much meat."

"I ate one more scoop too," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"My scoops were bigger than yours," General said.

"Not necessarily."

General suddenly leapt up and glared at him.

Lu Xiaofeng still lay on the dais calmly.

"Stand up," General said. "Let's cook another pot and compete."

"No need," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"You're admitting defeat?"

"I've already won, why compete again? I've already triumphed, so why should I admit defeat?"

General glared at him, the veins on his forehead popping out, each green line thicker than most people's.

Lu Xiaofeng said lightly: "So not only has your tummy burst, your head is swelling too."

General's fists clenched and his bones crackled like firecrackers; already at eight feet ten inches, he seemed to have grown an extra half feet.

It looked as though this man not only possessed innate superhuman strength, he'd also perfected his skills.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed instead. "You want to fight?"

General shut his mouth.

Now he'd concentrated all the strength within him, and if he spoke, all that strength would disperse.

Lu Xiaofeng said: "I've lost interest in eating meat, but fighting, I can still oblige."

General suddenly bellowed and struck with his fist.

He'd stored up his energy for long and was just like the bow when drawn tight. The force of this fist was near unimaginable.

A flurry of noises ensued as the stove and pot toppled over, even the zhang-wide table and chairs had fallen down; the cutlery and lamps on the table had either smashed to the floor or crushed to bits on the table.

Lu Xiaofeng, too, had nearly been blown outside by the force of that fist, travelling over at least three or four long tables, over the heads of more than ten people, across more than ten zhang of the great hall, just like a kite with a string that had snapped.

Immediately, a burst of applause sounded in the great hall. General stood on the high dais looking even more majestic, awe-inspiring and domineering.

But at this moment, there was a “whoosh” sound and Lu Xiaofeng was back in front of him, a smile on his face as he said: “That blow really cooled me up, how about another one?”

General roared with rage and struck three times in quick succession.

His blows were not fancy or tricky, but every fist struck was solid and effective.

Although these three blows were not as powerful as the first one, they were far quicker than the first blow.

Lu Xiaofeng was once again blown off, but not to outside the hall; suddenly he somersaulted in the air and landed behind General.

General might be bulky but he was agile and his actions quicker. Feet apart, knees bent and arms akimbo, he shed his robe, pulled back as though he was shooting at the moon, and released another three blows in rapid succession.

These were the most basic of fist skills, but coming from him they were not blows that could be countered by ordinary people.

Fortunately, Lu Xiaofeng was not an ordinary person, indeed it would be impossible to find another Lu Xiaofeng in the world.

He darted aside in a flash and suddenly reached a hand out to grasp

General's elbow before ramming his head against General's ribs.

He actually caused General's one hundred and thirty-seven jin body stumbling backwards, almost falling off the high dais.

But Lu Xiaofeng was even more shocked.

He suddenly realized that this person possessed unusual strength; ramming his head against that body was like crashing into a stone wall and he was seeing stars.

And because he was dizzy and shocked, he laughed even louder, saying: "You lost again."

"Rubbish," General said.

"I almost knocked you down, you still won't admit defeat?"

"What boxing skills did you use?"

"Head-boxing," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"What sort of skill is that?"

"That's a fighting skill. So long as the opponent is knocked down, any skill can be used."

General laughed coldly. "I'll see what else you can still use."

He got back to the same stance and struck again, his blows coming thick and fast, purposely establishing an advantage for himself.

This time, as he gave free play to his skills, one could see the true depth of his power.

Lu Xiaofeng had no way of breaking through, not with the way this was evolving. Lu Xiaofeng seemed to have realized this point as well, so he abandoned attacking and retreated to one corner of the stone dais, suddenly bent over double and clutched his stomach: "I can't, my stomach is hurting like crazy."

In truth, he knew that even if he died of stomach pains, nobody would care.

General shot forward like an arrow, raining blows.

At the point where he leapt up, Lu Xiaofeng had already slipped under his legs like a fish, then pressed his hands to the floor and arched upwards, slamming his bum against the other's.

General was already fully focused on the attack and could not withdraw the force exerted, so this time he was actually knocked off the dais by Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng clapped his hands and laughed loudly. "You lost again."

General's face was red with fury, his lips trembling.

"Why don't you ask me this time what sort of skill I used?"

General didn't ask, didn't open his mouth.

"It's bum-boxing," Lu Xiaofeng said. He smiled and continued: "Next time if you see someone using his bum in a fight, you'd better stay far away, because you would definitely not be his match."

General roared again and struck out once more. This time his target was not a person, but the stone dais.

The dais, made of green stone, was now smashed to smithereens that scattered in all directions. He leapt up as well and struck the second blow while in mid-air.

While such a strike was powerful, it also easily exposed one's weaknesses, and was actually best used against a weaker opponent.

Lu Xiaofeng was definitely not weaker than he, so this was a cautious move on his part because he knew Lu Xiaofeng couldn't hold his balance.

Nobody could stand properly on that crumbling dais with all that crushed stone scattered about like darts. That also meant one could not strike properly and could only retreat and hide. No matter how one hid, one would be unable withstand being swept away by the force of his

blows.

Although this move was extremely cautious, it was however a definite killer!

Lu Xiaofeng had not recovered from his injury and his body was still very weak; he would surely be unable to withstand General's aggression.

He didn't.

He could actually still retaliate, in circumstances that were completely unimaginable, he fought back.

General was vastly experienced and could decide battles in a very short time, and he'd been certain of victory.

A pity he had miscalculated this time.

Lu Xiaofeng was always unpredictable and always did things that people thought would be impossible to do.

Unique Lu Xiaofeng, unparalleled Lingxi Fingers.

His body suddenly flew up diagonally, used his index finger gently flick General's fist and his middle finger to flick General's chest.

What was the use of doing that against an iron fist that could smash

the stone dais or a chest that couldn't even be cut up with a steel sabre?

It worked.

Nobody could imagine the amount of power that went into these two finger flicks.

General roared, flew up, crashed down heavily on the heap of crushed stone.

There were still thirty six people in the great hall, all staring at Lu Xiaofeng, an odd expression in their eyes.

Lu Xiaofeng had a forced smile on his face.

He could only smile like that, because he knew that even if those people weren't General's friends, they'd now become his enemies.

When a newcomer comes to a foreign place and suddenly has thirty six enemies, it can't have been a pleasant thing for anyone.

He could only hope General wasn't too badly hurt.

When he turned his head around, General who had been lying on the crushed stone had disappeared.

He turned around again and saw a man clothed in grey making his way

slowly towards the doorway; General was in this man's arms.

Lu Xiaofeng's sharp ears had not at all picked up where this man had materialized from, how he had managed to carry General away and reach the doorway.

Lu Xiaofeng was stunned.

The man in grey was already out of the door.

The thirty six people in the great hall had all stood up and followed him out slowly; nobody turned around to spare Lu Xiaofeng a glance, as though already regarding Lu Xiaofeng as a dead man.

No matter how pretty a corpse, nobody was willing to look at it even once.

Lu Xiaofeng also suddenly felt as though he was standing in a tomb, there was neither man nor noise, and although the lights were still there, the place seemed darker than darkness.

If you couldn't see anything, not even a sliver of hope, what use is light to you?

He was still standing there dumbly after a long while, unmoving.

This was a foreign place, so where could he go?

He was on the path of no return, so where else could he go?

At this point, he saw a pair of eyes and a hand.

A small and fair hand, a pair of laughing eyes, and Ye Ling was at the doorway waving at him.

Lu Xiaofeng immediately crossed over.

Even if there were a thousand traps outside, a million ambushes waiting for him, he'd walk out without hesitation.

He'd suddenly realized that the despair and helplessness of being alone was infinitely worse than death.

There was nothing outside, only a person, a patch of darkness.

In the darkness, Ye Ling's eyes seemed to shine like the first star rising from the Mid-Autumn night.

She gazed at Lu Xiaofeng and smiled, then suddenly said:
"Congratulations."

Lu Xiaofeng didn't understand. "Why congratulate me?"

Ye Ling said: "Because you haven't died. So long as one is alive, that is something worth congratulating."

"I should have been dead?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Ye Ling nodded.

"And now?"

"Now at least you can live on in the Mansion of Spirits."

Lu Xiaofeng expelled a breath and couldn't help asking: "Who was that man in grey just now?"

"You couldn't guess?"

"It was Old Sabre Honcho?"

Ye Ling's expression shifted and she countered: "What kind of a man do you think he is?"

"A frightening one," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"What about his skills?"

"I couldn't tell."

"Even you couldn't tell."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "Precisely because I couldn't figure it out, so it's frightening."

"What kind of a person do you think Old Sabre Honcho should be?"

"A very scary one, of course!"

Ye Ling laughed and said: "Then he should be Old Sabre Honcho, so you needn't have asked."

Lu Xiaofeng was smiling too, but it wasn't pleasant at all.

It couldn't be a good feeling for a highly-skilled martial artist as he to discover that there was someone whose skills far surpassed his.

Ye Ling's expression grew somber and she said coldly: "You got into a fight on your first day here. He would have killed you but for someone pleading on your behalf, otherwise you'd have died twice."

"Who pleaded for me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Ye Ling pointed at her own nose. "It's me."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed again. "Of course it'd be you, I knew that."

Ye Ling smiled merrily. "Since you know, how do you plan to repay me?"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled and said: "I plan to bite off your nose."

Ye Ling stared at him and suddenly leapt up. "Scram, buzz off back to your dog hole and don't come out until the bell tolls."

"That's what Old Sabre Honcho said?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Mm."

"So can I see him?"

"No."

She made a face and said: "But when he wants to meet you, you won't be able to get out of it."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said: "Actually it's not bad to get some rest in the house, but it's a bit hard since there's no food."

"You have food, three meals a day, six dishes and soup. Take your pick."

"I can order tomorrow's menu?"

"You can."

"I want to eat braised pork shanks, yellow lamb stew, Sanxian duck, fried tofu dumplings, prawns in black ginseng, five-plum pigeon, and a bowl of cucumber and meatball soup."

Ye Ling gazed at him oddly, as though feeling puzzled.

"Well, these are good dishes," Lu Xiaofeng explained. "So what's so strange about that?"

"I'm just curious about one thing," Ye Ling said.

"Oh?"

"I'm wondering why you don't want to eat my nose?"

The lights had gone out.

Lu Xiaofeng lay in the darkness; this was his first night in the Mansion of Spirits.

He'd only been here half a day, but had encountered many strange and frightening things, and many odd and scary people.

Especially the Soul Collector and Old Sabre Honcho, these two were so highly-skilled it was beyond imagination.

He was still alive now, but what about the future?

Who knows how many more dark, lonely and scary nights he would have to endure?

He didn't want to think anymore.

He suddenly felt an unspeakable kind of dread...

[1] Hongmen banquet (鸿门宴, hong2 men2 yan4): a dinner party intended to kill the guests. Hongmen (鸿门) is located in modern day Xi'an, Shaanxi province. In BC 206, Xiang Yu's armies marched into Hongmen to eliminate Liu Bang. After mediation by Xiang Yu's uncle Xiang Bo, Liu Bang personally went to Hongmen to meet Xiang Yu, who threw a banquet in his honor. At the banquet, Xiang Yu's adviser Fan Zeng ordered Xiang Zhuang (Xiang Yu's cousin) to assassinate Liu Bang, under the guise of performing a sword dance. Xiang Bo realized the danger and joined the sword dance to protect Liu Bang. Later on, Liu Bang escaped back to his camp on the pretext of going to the latrine. 鸿门宴 is later used to refer to a trap or a situation ostensibly joyous but in fact treacherous.

Chapter 6 – Embattled on all sides

Translated by Junny

The next morning, the mountain valley was still covered in thick mist and the little hut seemed to be floating in the cloud heap; opening the door, one could even feel like one was drifting, as though a duckweed floating on the water surface.

There were many people like this in the world, people with no concerns, no roots.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and closed the door heavily, his spirits so low that it was as though he'd seen his lover get on someone else's wedding sedan chair.

The only sound that cheered him up a little was the knocking sound indicating that food had arrived.

The delivery person had pockmarks all over the face, along with a dull expression and a mouth full of yellow teeth. The only happy thing about him was that he was carrying a large food box.

There were six dishes and a soup in that food box, along with white rice. Those dishes actually contained what Lu Xiaofeng had ordered last night.

However, it was only a bite-sized portion of each dish; one might have missed it if one had bad eyesight, and if the breeze got any bigger, the food would be blown away.

The best of it all was that Sanxian duck[1], which had only one bone, a piece of skin and a duck feather.

"That's Sanxian duck?" Lu Xiaofeng yelled.

Pockmarks actually glared and said: "If that's not duck, what is? A person?"

"Even so, where the Sanxian part?"

"The duck feather was freshly plucked, duck skin freshly peeled off, and the duck bone is very fresh too. If that's not freshness, what is?"

Lu Xiaofeng shut his mouth.

Pockmarks had already flounced off, slamming the door on the way out.

Lu Xiaofeng gazed at the six dishes, then at the single grain of rice in the bowl, not knowing whether he should weep or laugh.

Now he finally understood why that Mister Wandering Soul was so interested in chicken bones.

He picked up the chopsticks, then set them down, and suddenly heard someone sighing from the little back window: "Your piece of braised pork shanks is bigger than the one I had yesterday, at least twice."

Lu Xiaofeng didn't need to turn around to know that Mister Wandering Soul had returned, and couldn't help asking: "How long have you been eating such meals?"

"Three months," Wandering Soul said.

He tunneled through the window and his eyes fixed on the six dishes on the table, said: "There's a trick to eating such meals."

"What trick?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Savor every dish very slowly," Wandering Soul said, "best if you use your front teeth to gnaw at it, then lick it with your tongue, so as to get the full taste."

"But you're still not dead," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"That's because I don't want to die yet," Wandering Soul said. "The more other people want me to die, the more I want to live on, just to show them."

Lu Xiaofeng couldn't help a sigh too, and said: "It mustn't have been easy for you to survive until now."

Wandering Soul nodded slowly, two tear droplets rolling down from the corner of his eyes.

Lu Xiaofeng couldn't bear to look, so he lay down on the bed and

covered his head with the pillow.

"The food is here, aren't you going to eat?" Wandering Soul asked.

"You go ahead, I'm not hungry," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Because you have to live too!" Wandering Soul said.

Suddenly, he yanked the pillow off Lu Xiaofeng and yelled: "If you want to die, you might as well let me bash you to death now since the flesh on your body can still sustain me for a few happy meals."

Lu Xiaofeng gazed at him, then at the bony face that was barely covered by skin, then suddenly said: "My name is Lu Xiaofeng."

"I know," Wandering Soul said.

"What about you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked. "Who are you? How did you come to be here?"

This time, Wandering Soul didn't get agitated, he merely stared at Lu Xiaofeng with socket-like eyes and countered: "And how did you end up here?"

"Because..."

Wandering Soul interrupted: "Because you did something wrong and

were forced into a corner, so you ended up on the path of no return."

Lu Xiaofeng had to admit to that.

"Now every one in the martial arts fraternity must be thinking you're dead, Ximen Chuixue too, that's why you can continue living here."

"What about you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Me too," Wandering Soul said. He added: "General, Cousin, Hook, Housekeeper... these people are all in the same situation."

"But I'm not afraid of letting them know my background," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"They are afraid of you," Wandering Soul said.

"Why?"

"They still don't trust you. They cannot let anyone know they are still alive, otherwise..."

"Otherwise their enemies will most probably turn up here."

"Indeed."

"What about you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked. "You don't trust me either?"

"Even if I do, I can't tell you anything about me," Wandering Soul said.

"Why not?"

An odd look entered Wandering Soul's eyes; was it fear or agony?

"I can't say, definitely not..."

He was muttering to himself, as though warning himself, and his body began floating up again.

But Lu Xiaofeng was determined not to let him get away this time, and with lightning speed, caught hold of his arm and asked again: "Why not?"

"Because..." Wandering Soul gritted his teeth and said determinedly: "Because if I tell you, we definitely won't be able to become friends."

Lu Xiaofeng still didn't understand and wanted to press on, but Wandering Soul's emaciated, wizened hand suddenly turned soft as silk and slipped from his grasp.

Nobody had been able to slip away from Lu Xiaofeng's grasp before.

He reached out once more, but Wandering Soul had already tunneled through the window, just like the wispy wandering souls.

Lu Xiaofeng was stunned.

He'd never seen anyone who had perfected flexibility to such an extent; perhaps he'd once heard Sikong Zhaixing mention it but even this memory itself was hazy.

All his memories were becoming hazy; Lu Xiaofeng had been shut inside this wooden hut for two or three days.

Was it two days? Three days? Or four days? He couldn't remember clearly.

So hunger not only causes memory to deteriorate, it could also hurt brainpower and let one remember things that one should forget, but forget things that one should remember.

A person lying all alone and starving in a tiny hut the size of a pigeon cage is agony that nobody can endure.

However, he still couldn't resist leaping up excitedly after hearing the sound of a bell outside the hut.

"If the bell doesn't ring, you cannot come out."

So now the bell had sounded, he leapt up and dashed outside, even without his boots.

It was still foggy outside and right now it was dusk.

The setting sun in the misty fog shone like a seven-colored halo.

This world was still beautiful after all, and it was a pleasurable thing to be alive.

There were still thirty six or seven people in the hall, but Lu Xiaofeng did not know any of them.

The people he'd met before were all not here; the Soul Collector, General, Wandering Soul, Ye Ling... why did they not come? And Dugu Mei, why had he disappeared once he entered this mountain valley?

Lu Xiaofeng settled down in one corner and nobody paid him any attention, not even to spare him a glance. Everyone looked stern and the mood seemed heavy.

Maybe it was like that for people living here.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed privately and raised his head for a look, only to realize that the high dais, on which the huge pot of meat had rested, was now holding up a coffin.

A brand new coffin, with the lid not yet nailed shut.

Who had died? Was it General? Had they asked Lu Xiaofeng here to avenge General's death?

Lu Xiaofeng was feeling a little uneasy when he saw Ye Ling rush in.

This smiling girl who was fond of wearing red was now dressed in white mourning clothes, and was crying bitterly.

The moment she rushed in, she collapsed onto the coffin crying uncontrollably.

Lu Xiaofeng could never have imagined that she would weep so for someone else. She was still young, lively and beautiful, these sad and unfortunate events had seemed they would never happen to her.

How was the deceased related to her? How had the person died?

Lu Xiaofeng was just preparing to find an opportunity to comfort her later, but she'd already begun hollering: "Lu Xiaofeng, come here!"

He had no choice but to go over.

He couldn't figure out why Ye Ling would summon him over, he didn't want to get too near.

But Ye Ling wouldn't stop hurrying him, telling him to walk faster, to come nearer and get up onto the stone dais.

He lifted his head and realized she was glaring at him with teary eyes, her gaze full of animosity.

Lu Xiaofeng couldn't help asking: "You want me to come up?"

Ye Ling nodded.

"What for?" he asked.

"Come up and look at him!" she said.

"Him" was of course the person lying in the coffin, and what was so interesting about looking at a person already in a coffin?

But she was insistent, as though she wouldn't take no for an answer.

Lu Xiaofeng had to go.

Ye Ling lifted the coffin lid and a mixture of fragrance and stench immediately wafted up, the person in the coffin had evidently turned swollen and rotten, so why did she want Lu Xiaofeng to come and see this?

Lu Xiaofeng only took one look before he felt like puking.

This person was evidently Ye Guhong, the one who had died in that man-eating forest!

Ye Ling gritted her teeth and glared at Lu Xiaofeng, said: "You know who he is?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded.

"He is my brother," Ye Ling said. "My real brother. If he hadn't saved me, I'd have died in the ditch."

Her eyes were full of grief and hatred. "Now he's dead, you tell me, shouldn't I avenge him?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded again.

He never wished to argue with women, and besides, there was no room for argument in this matter.

Ye Ling said: "Do you know how he died?"

Lu Xiaofeng could neither nod nor shake his head, or explain or deny; he couldn't help wishing there would be another coffin nearby so that he could hide in there.

Ye Ling gave a cold laugh. "Even if you don't say, I already know."

"Know what?" Lu Xiaofeng couldn't help asking.

"He died in that patch of forest out there," she said. "Died for three days, and during those three days, only you had been in that forest."

Lu Xiaofeng gave a resigned smile. "You think I killed him?"

"Indeed!"

"Wrong. There were other people besides him in that forest during those three days."

The person who had spoken up for Lu Xiaofeng turned out to be Dugu Mei, who had previously been on a disappearing act. "At least I'd been there. I came from there too."

"Can you be considered a person?" Ye Ling yelled. "You had the ability to kill my brother?"

Dugu Mei sighed: "Even if I wasn't a person, there would still be others."

"Others?" Ye Ling asked.

Dugu Mei nodded and said: "Even if I weren't your brother's match, it wouldn't be too difficult for this person to kill your brother."

Ye Ling was outraged. "Whom are you referring to?"

"Ximen Chuixue!"

His eyes were smiling just like those of an old fox, as he said: "Have you heard of this name?"

Ye Ling's face changed; she had indeed heard of this name.

Ximen Chuixue!

The mystical sword among swords, the sword god!

Whoever had heard of this name once would not forget it.

Dugu Mei eyed her and said: "Moreover, Lu Xiaofeng was rather seriously injured then, he was at most half a Lu Xiaofeng, so how could half a Lu Xiaofeng be a match for Wudang's Little White Dragon?"

"You lie!" Ye Ling yelled again.

Dugu Mei sighed again and said: "Why would a man who doesn't give a damn about kinship lie for another person?"

Foggy night, narrow road.

They walked shoulder to shoulder along the narrow road; they had walked like this for a long stretch of road.

That road was far narrower than this one, for it was a dead end.

Lu Xiaofeng finally opened his mouth: "Why would an old man who

doesn't give a damn about kinship lie for me?"

Dugu Mei laughed and said: "Because this old man likes you."

He continued: "Fortunately this old man doesn't have Pink Swallow's habit, so you need not worry at all."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed too, laughed loudly: "Does this old man have wine?"

Dugu Mei said: "Not only wine, I have meat as well."

Even Lu Xiaofeng's eyes were smiling: "Really?"

Dugu Mei said: "I not only have meat, I have a friend too."

Lu Xiaofeng asked: "Your friend, or mine?"

Dugu Mei said: "My friends are your friends."

The wine was good, and so was the friend.

To someone who enjoys drinking, the meaning of a good friend usually means one who can hold his liquor.

This friend not only enjoyed drinking to his heart's content, he was forthright as well. After a few cups, he suddenly asked: "I know you are Lu

Xiaofeng. Do you know who I am?"

"I don't."

"Why don't you ask?"

Lu Xiaofeng only gave a resigned smile: "Because I have learnt my lesson."

"You asked others and they refused to say?"

"Mm."

"But I am not others, I am just me." He downed the wine he held in his left hand, and used his right hand to hook a piece of meat.

The meat was hooked up because his right hand was not a hand, it was a hook. A steel hook.

"You are Hook?" Lu Xiaofeng finally recalled.

Hook admitted that!

"I know you have heard others talk about me, but there is something you definitely don't know."

"What is it?"

"I've wanted to make friends with you since the day you came." He patted Dugu Mei's shoulder and said: "That's because your friend is my friend, your enemy is my enemy."

"He is our friend, but who is our enemy?"

"Ximen Chuixue!"

Lu Xiaofeng was startled: "You are..."

Hook said: "I am Hai Qikuo!"

Lu Xiaofeng was even more surprised: "The 'One-armed Divine Dragon' Hai Qikuo who rode roughshod over the seven seas years ago?"

Hai Qikuo threw his head back and roared with laughter: "So Lu Xiaofeng does know my name after all."

Lu Xiaofeng gazed at him, the shock in his eyes turning into suspicion, and suddenly shook his head. "You are not," he said. "Hai Qikuo already drowned at sea."

Hai Qikuo's laughter was even merrier: "It was someone else who died, a scapegoat who wore my Rolling Dragon Robe, carried my Rolling Dragon Sabre, and who resembled me."

He continued explaining: "Every one here has already died once

outside. Is that not the same for you as well?"

Lu Xiaofeng finally understood: "This is the Mansion of Spirits, and only dead people can come here."

Hai Qikuo laughed loudly and said: "If Ximen Chuixue knew we're still enjoying wine and food here, he'd probably explode in fury."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled: "It seems I do have quite a few friends here."

Hai Qikuo said: "You are very right. There are at least sixteen people here who were forced by Ximen Chuixue to seek refuge in the Mansion."

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes shone and asked: "Are there a few who were forced here by me?"

Hai Qikuo said: "Even if there are, you don't have to worry." He laughed and raised his cup, but suddenly lowered his voice: "There is only one person you have to beware of."

"Who is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Hai Qikuo said: "Actually, he can't be considered a person, he's just a wandering soul, that's all."

"Wandering Soul?" Lu Xiaofeng cried out involuntarily.

"You've met him?" Hai Qikuo asked.

Lu Xiaofeng did not deny.

Hai Qikuo said: "Do you know what kind of a person he is?"

"I would love to know," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Hai Qikuo said: "There is a very strange organization here called Council of Elders. When Old Sabre Honcho is away, this council takes care of everything here."

Lu Xiaofeng said: "Naturally the people in the Council of Elders are all elder statesmen. You are one of them, of course."

"Besides me, there are eight others," Hai Qikuo said. "However, the true elder statesmen are only two."

"Which two?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"One is Wandering Soul, the other is Soul Collector. They and the Ye sisters' father were the ones who helped Old Sabre Honcho with the Mansion set-up years ago. Now that Old Ye has died, there is no one else more senior than them."

Lu Xiaofeng said: "So because of this, I should beware of him?"

"There is one more thing," Hai Qikuo said.

Lu Xiaofeng picked up his wine cup and waited for him to go on.

Hai Qikuo said: "He's the elder statesman here, so if he wants to kill you, he can find a chance anytime and you won't be able to avoid it!"

Lu Xiaofeng asked: "He has reason to kill me?"

"Yes," Hai Qikuo said.

"What reason?"

"You killed his son."

"Who is his son?"

"Flying Jade Tiger."

Lu Xiaofeng breathed in deeply and suddenly felt that the wine he'd just drunk had all turned sour.

Hai Qikuo said: "He set up Black Tiger Sect, but just as the foundation of the sect was becoming stable, he had to come here with Old Sabre Honcho. He had offended someone he couldn't afford to offend, so he was at his wits' end."

"Whom did he offend?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Hai Qikuo said: "The Wooden Taoist, the most famous and respected member of Wudang."

Lu Xiaofeng couldn't help breathing in deeply again. Now he finally understood why Wandering Soul had refused all along to talk about his background.

Hai Qikuo said: "You destroyed Black Tiger Sect, and coincidentally the Wooden Taoist is your friend. So wouldn't you say he has enough reason to kill you?"

Lu Xiaofeng gave a resigned smile and said: "He does."

Hai Qikuo said: "The worst thing is that you know he wants to kill you, but you can't make a move."

Lu Xiaofeng said: "Because he's the most senior in the council."

Hai Qikuo nodded and said: "Besides him, there are eight others in the council. If you kill him, these eight people will not let you off."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed: "So I can only wait for him to strike."

Hai Qikuo said: "He won't strike unless he can kill you with one blow. Since he hasn't done anything, he's probably waiting for an opportunity."

Although Lu Xiaofeng was not talking, he had not shut his mouth.

He was busy drinking.

Hai Qikuo sighed and said: "If you are drunk, that'd give him the chance to strike."

"I know," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"And you still continue drinking?" Hai Qikuo asked.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly smiled and said: "Since he's part of the council, he'll get his chance. I might as well drink more while I'm still alive."

Drinking is not the same as eating.

A person who usually eats three bowls of rice would definitely not be able to finish thirty, but a person who does not get drunk easily might sometimes be drunk only after a few cups.

Was Lu Xiaofeng already drunk?

"I'm not drunk yet." He pushed away Dugu Mei and Hai Qikuo: "I still recognize the way home, you two don't have to see me back."

Indeed, he knew his way back.

Sometimes, even when a person is dead drunk, he still knows his way home and only after he reaches home will he collapse.

If you are a drinker, you would definitely have had such an experience.

Lu Xiaofeng had had such an experience, and very often too.

"This is my home,
We all love it,
There's fish in front,
And flowers at the back."

Although this little hut had neither fish nor flowers, it was still his home.

A wanderer with no roots discovering he actually has a home to return to after he's drunk –

This is such a wonderful feeling. Except us wanderers, who else would understand?

Lu Xiaofeng started singing again, in a very loud voice, because he suddenly realized his own voice was sounding better and better.

There was no light in the hut, but once he pushed open the door, he felt a presence there.

"I know who you are, even if you don't speak a word." Lu Xiaofeng was

laughing, very loudly too: "You're Wandering Soul, one of the Elders here. Are you going to kill me since you're waiting here for me?"

The person in the hut still did not speak.

Lu Xiaofeng roared with laughter: "Even if you want to kill me, you would not do it behind my back, right? It's because you're the most famous among Wudang's secular disciples, because you're Mister Zhong. Boneless Zhong."

He went inside, shut the door and started searching for some flint: "Actually you were Wooden Taoist's old friend, but you shouldn't have secretly set up Black Tiger Clan outside. Otherwise, why would Wooden Taoist need to deal with you?"

There was still no sound, but there was light.

The flint had lit up to cast light on a person's face, one that was all skin and bones. That pair of sunken eyes was staring at Lu Xiaofeng unflinchingly.

Lu Xiaofeng said: "Now that we're both dead people, why continue to bear old grudges? Besides..."

He didn't continue.

His voice suddenly broke up, and the flint in his hand stopped burning.

He suddenly realized that this Mister Zhong was really a dead man!

The hut was pitch black. Lu Xiaofeng stood in the dark, unmoving, his limbs and body icy cold, as though he'd suddenly fallen into an icy pit.

But this was no icy pit; it was a trap.

He'd already realized it, but he had no way of escaping from it.

He had nowhere to run!

So he sat down instead. He'd just done so when he heard footsteps outside, and then someone knocking on the door.

"Are you asleep? I have something to tell you!" The voice was gentle – it was Ye Ling's.

Lu Xiaofeng closed his eyes.

"I know you're not sleeping yet, why won't you open the door?" Ye Ling's voice turned fierce. "Are you hiding a woman in there?"

Lu Xiaofeng finally sighed: "There's not even half a woman here, though there's a half-dead man."

Ye Ling sounded even fiercer: "I said before: if you dare to let women enter your house, I'll kill you. Doesn't matter if they're dead or alive."

"Bang", and the door slammed open.

"The women here are all dead anyway."

"This dead person is male, actually."

The flint was lit up again and Ye Ling finally saw the dead man: "And where's the other half?"

Lu Xiaofeng gave her a resigned smile: "That would be me!"

Ye Ling gazed at him, and then the dead man, then suddenly jumped up: "You killed him? How could you? Don't you know who he is?"

Lu Xiaofeng didn't open his mouth. He didn't need to, since someone outside answered on his behalf: "He knows."

The hut was small, the window was tiny as well. Ye Ling was blocking the doorway, so the person outside had no way of walking in.

But they had other methods.

Suddenly, another there was another banging sound. He didn't reach a hand out to block, not even when the roof crashed down and the people in the hut suddenly found themselves out in the open.

Lu Xiaofeng didn't move.

The roof crashed down on him, but he neither stuck a hand out to cover himself nor escaped, he only let out a sigh.

This was his first time having a home, and it was very likely his last.

"So there are not only unlucky people in this world, there are unlucky houses too." Lu Xiaofeng lamented: "The hut was unlucky because it chose the wrong owner. People are unlucky because they befriend the wrong people."

"You're unlucky because you did something wrong."

"You can do anything, but why did you have to kill him?"

"I already told you, even if you know he wants to kill you, you can't kill him or even I wouldn't let you off."

That last was said by Hai Qikuo. As for the other two, one had a pale and beardless face and was well-dressed, while the other was tall and thin, with a hooked nose and hunched back. One was always smiling, as though he admired even himself, while the other was always frowning and unappreciative of himself.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly asked: "Which one is Cousin?"

Cousin's shiny face was still wearing a smile, but he purposely let out a

sigh. "Fortunately I'm not your cousin, or even I would be in trouble thanks to you."

Lu Xiaofeng purposely sighed as well and said: "Fortunately you're not my cousin, or I'd definitely bang my head and die!"

Cousin laughed. "I guarantee you don't have to bang your head and die, we'll think of many ways to let you die."

He was laughing even more merrily. He took pleasure in whatever he was saying and was very pleased with it.

The other person suddenly said: "I'm a housekeeper anyway, so I definitely have to concern myself with this."

He sighed gloomily and said: "Actually I really do not like poking my nose into other people's business one bit. I have not had a good night's sleep for many months now, and my back has been hurting me lately. The pain in my teeth is even worse..."

He kept on grumbling and nagging; he was evidently not pleased with his own life or that of other people's.

Lu Xiaofeng gave a resigned smile. "So three of the Council of Elders have appeared."

Ye Ling suddenly said: "Four"

Lu Xiaofeng was startled. "You too?"

Ye Ling made a face and said coldly: "Elder refers to seniority in rank, not in age."

Cousin smiled and said: "Well said."

Housekeeper added: "Old Sabre Honcho isn't here, so if the majority of the Elders agree on something, then that decides things."

"What things?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Anything," Cousin replied.

"How many people is the majority?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"How many are there in the Council?" Housekeeper said. "Majority means five people."

Lu Xiaofeng let out a sigh of relief and said: "There are only four of you here."

"Five," Housekeeper said.

"The dead are counted too?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Every one is dead here," Cousin said. "Mister Zhong merely died again."

"So you can now reach a consensus on something," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"You are very clever," Cousin said idly. "Surely you must know what we are going to decide on."

Housekeeper said: "We are going to decide whether you should die."

"Don't I have the chance to defend myself?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"No," Housekeeper replied.

Lu Xiaofeng could only give a resigned smile.

"So have you decided he should die?" Hai Qikuo asked.

"Of course he should," Housekeeper said.

"Definitely he must die," Cousin added.

Hai Qikuo sighed again and said: "I believe Mister Zhong is of like mind."

"Now it only remains for Miss Ye to decide," said Cousin.

Ye Ling bit her lip and darted a glance at Lu Xiaofeng from the corner of

her eye. It was as though she was like a cat that had already caught the mouse.

At this point, a voice suddenly floated over from the dark woods behind: "Why don't you ask what I think?"

A streak of light burst through from the dark woods and a pair of well-dressed girls carrying gauze lanterns[2] walked over. A woman with extremely long hair lazily followed behind.

She was not particularly beautiful; her cheekbones were a little too high and her mouth a little too big, the misty look in eyes giving one the impression that she was not awake.

She was casually dressed in a very loose black night robe – it seemed like a man's – that was only loosely held together by a sash. Her long hair flowing, she had come barefoot, not having even put on shoes.

But she was undoubtedly a very special woman. Most men would be attracted to her at first glance.

Watching her stroll over, Cousin's brows knitted instead, while Ye Ling was pouting and Housekeeper forced a smile, asking: "Do you think he should die?"

Her reply was very succinct: "No."

Ye Ling had not expressed her opinion, but now she suddenly jumped up and demanded: "Why not?"

This woman smiled lazily and said: "To sentence someone to death, you need evidence. What evidence do you have?"

"Mister Zhong's corpse is evidence," said Housekeeper.

The black-robed woman said: "Would you hide a body in your house after you've killed him?"

Housekeeper looked at Cousin, who looked at Hai Qikuo. The trio didn't open their mouths.

Ye Ling leapt up again and said: "They have no evidence, but I do."

"What do you have?" the black-robed woman asked.

"With my own eyes, I saw him strike," Ye Ling said.

Not only was Lu Xiaofeng stunned by her words, Cousin and the others seemed rather surprised as well.

However, the black-robed woman's face had no expression as she said lightly: "Even if you really did see that, it's of no use."

"Who says so?" Ye Ling asked.

"I did," the woman said.

Lazily, she crossed over to stand in front of Lu Xiaofeng, used one hand to hook the sash and the other to tidy her hair. "If you aren't satisfied, you are welcome to take me on."

Hai Qikuo sighed and asked: "Must you do this? What for?"

"Because I can, because it's none of your business," the black-robed woman said.

Hai Qikuo stared at her: "Must you force us to strike?"

"You dare?" she asked.

Hai Qikuo glared at her, his eyes nearly spitting fire, but he did not even dare to lift a finger against her.

Cousin's face had lost its smile and his expression was ghastly as he said: "Widow Hua, you'd better wise up. Hai is interested in you but I'm not."

Widow Hua tossed him a glance and said coldly: "What can you do to me? Just because you learnt some swordplay from that old man Bashan, you dare to be rude to me?"

Cousin's face turned bright red at that. Suddenly he roared and pulled out a sword, a soft one that had been attached at his waist.

The soft sword trembled slightly in the breeze and became as straight as an arrow. A flash of brilliance and he'd already struck.

Lu Xiaofeng had never in his dreams expected this somber, affected man would become so violent and rash when he was provoked.

Widow Hua had already anticipated this, however. The hand that was hooked on the sash moved and that soft piece of cloth suddenly straightened out as well. Like a poisonous snake, it had already wrapped itself around Cousin's sword.

Only the best iron could fashion a soft sword, but alas, his sword could not even slice through a sash.

Widow Hua's hand moved again and the sash flew out, slapped Cousin squarely in the face.

Cousin's face turned red, and Lu Xiaofeng could also feel his face flaming.

He suddenly realized that Widow Hua was not wearing anything underneath her robe.

Without the sash holding the robe together, all the vital parts of her body were now exposed.

But she did not care in the least, and was still standing there lazily, asking: "Do you want to try again?"

Cousin indeed wished to have another go, but Housekeeper and Hai Qikuo were now holding him back.

Hai Qikuo worked his throat furiously, wanting to shift his gaze away from Widow Hua's robe, but he was unable to move an inch.

Widow Hua was no longer young, but her body seemed as though it still was, except that it was even more alluring, more mature than that of a young girl's.

Hai Qikuo sighed again and gave a resigned smile: "Can you please fasten that robe before you speak?"

Widow Hua's reply was just as succinct: "No."

"Why not?" Hai Qikuo asked.

"Because I like it, and because it's none of your business."

"So what exactly do you want?" Housekeeper interrupted.

"I don't really want anything," Widow Hua said. "But Old Sabre Honcho let Lu Xiaofeng in, so whoever wants to kill him, that person would have to wait until Old Sabre Honcho returns before doing anything."

"And now?" Housekeeper asked.

"Now I'm taking him away, of course," Widow Hua said.

Ye Ling leapt up again, even higher now. "What right do you have to take him away?"

"My sash," Widow Hua said lightly.

"What can this sash do?" Ye Ling asked.

"It can't do much," Widow Hua said. "At most, it can tie you up, peel off your clothes and let Hook have his way with you."

Ye Ling's face flamed and her fists balled, but she was simply unable to strike back and could only stamp her foot. Savagely, she said: "If my sister were back, I'll see if you dare to be this rude."

Widow Hua smiled and said: "But your sister isn't back, so you can only watch me take him away."

She took Lu Xiaofeng's hand and glanced back with a laugh: "I have an extra big bed at my place, enough for both of us to sleep very comfortably. Aren't you going to hurry up and come with me?"

She really took Lu Xiaofeng away then, and every one else could only stand by and watch.

After a long while, Ye Ling suddenly said: "Old Hook, are you even a

thing?"

"I'm not a thing, I'm a person," Hai Qikuo replied.

Ye Ling laughed coldly. "A wretch like you is a person? Among us, only you could have handled that b!tch, so why didn't you strike?"

"Because I still want her to sleep with me," he said.

"Are you really that desperate for women?" she asked.

"Definitely."

"Fine," Ye Ling said. "If you kill her, I'll sleep with you, for three days."

Hai Qikuo laughed. "You're jealous? You like Lu Xiaofeng too?"

Ye Ling gnashed her teeth and said savagely: "No matter whether I'm jealous, this time I mean what I say. I'm still young, but that b!tch is an old hag now. At least in this aspect, I'm superior to her."

"But..." Hai Qikuo hesitated.

"Do you want to see the goods first?" Ye Ling asked. "Fine!"

She suddenly tore off her bottoms, revealing a pair of smooth legs.

Hai Qikuo's eyes glazed over. "I can only see this much?"

"If you want to see the rest, kill that b!tch and we'll talk."

[1] Sanxian duck: 三鲜鸭子. The "Sanxian" part translates literally to "three freshness".

[2] gauze lantern (纱灯, sha1 deng1): a kind of sheer lantern made from materials such as gauze, yarn, voile.

Chapter 7 – Drowning sorrows in wine

Translated by Junny

The bed was indeed very big. The sheets were white, the bedding brand new. The moment they walked in, Widow Hua immediately lay down on the bed.

Lu Xiaofeng remained standing at the head of the bed.

Widow Hua scrutinized him from head to toe with her misty eyes, then suddenly said: "By now you should know that I'm that scary Widow Hua." Lu Xiaofeng nodded.

"Naturally you'd have heard that I'm a b.itch, a man-eating one," she continued.

Lu Xiaofeng nodded again.

"Do you know people here think I can sleep with them anytime?"

Lu Xiaofeng still nodded his head.

Widow Hua's eyes seemed to mist over. "So why aren't you jumping into bed?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not even move.

"You don't dare?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not nod his head, but he did not shake it either.

Widow Hua sighed and said: "Of course you don't dare, because you don't even know who I am!"

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly smiled. "There are not many who can merge the zhenqi of the Liu Family of Huainan and Diancang Sect's Flowing Cloud Swordplay, so..."

"So, what?" Widow Hua asked.

"So you must be Liu Qingqing, the Huainan Hero's woman, and the wife of the Diancang swordsman."

"Do you know too that I have slept with Xie Jian's four best friends?"

Lu Xiaofeng admitted that, since it was such a scandal to begin with.

"Since you know everything, why don't you come to bed?" she asked.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled and said: "Because I don't want to, and because it's none of your business."

Widow Hua laughed. "Looks like you're quite different from other men."

She suddenly leapt from the bed. "Come, I'll treat you to a drink."

As they started getting tipsy, the mist in her eyes seemed to deepen as well.

Precisely because the valley was always shrouded in mist, that was why it was able to preserve its aura of mystery.

Was it not the same for her as well?

It was probably not too difficult to see her naked body, but it was much harder to guess what was in her heart.

After another cup of wine, she suddenly asked: "Do you know why Hai Qikuo always wants me to sleep with him?"

"Because he thinks you have slept with the other men here."

Widow Hua smiled. "Every one thinks that way, but... the number of men I've slept with, I think not even you can guess."

"Not even one in this place?"

"Only one," Widow Hua said.

Lu Xiaofeng started drinking.

Widow Hua's gaze seemed very faraway, as though there was a faintly

discernible figure in the distance; her gaze was filled with love and adoration.

After a long while, she snapped out of her reverie: "Why did you not ask me who this person is?"

"Why should I ask?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Widow Hua smiled. "You are indeed a unique person. I like unique men."

Her smile suddenly vanished: "Xie Jian was a very unique man as well. I married him because I really liked him at that time."

"But you changed later on," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"It was not I who changed, it was him," she said.

A slit appeared through the mist in her eyes, sliced by a sword full of hatred and anguish. "You will never be able to imagine what kind of person he had turned into, much less the terrifying things he had done."

"Terrifying?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Do you know why I slept with his friend?" Widow Hua asked. Her fists clenched and tears rolled down her cheeks. "Because... because he wanted me to do it, he liked to watch... he even knelt and begged me to, even threatened me with his sword..."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly averted his gaze, downed his cup of wine. He suddenly felt his gut clenching and he almost felt like vomiting.

When he turned around again, Widow Hu had quietly wiped away the tearstains on her face.

She too downed her cup of wine: "You must be wondering why I am telling you these things."

Lu Xiaofeng did not feel it was strange, not at all.

When one is feeling grief and anguish, and these emotions have been suppressed for too long, one is wont to find someone else to confide in.

Even though Widow Hua had managed to vent her pain, she was getting tipsier: "He's an old man now, but he is a real man, an extraordinary one. Even if I don't love him, I respect him. So long as I can make him happy, I am willing to do anything."

She raised her head and gazed at Lu Xiaofeng: "When you meet him, you will like him too."

Lu Xiaofeng could not resist asking: "You mean..."

"I am talking about Old Sabre Honcho," Widow Hua said.

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked. "Old Sabre Honcho?"

Widow Hua nodded and said: "He is the only man for me here. I know you couldn't have imagined that." She smiled, a desolate one: "I had thought no one in this world would be able to understand me or sympathize with me, but he understands me and sympathizes with me, and it is genuine."

"So you gave yourself to him?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I can sacrifice everything for him," Widow Hua said. "Even if he tells me to die, I will die. But... but..."

She did not continue. Such emotion was not something that could be put into words, and she knew Lu Xiaofeng would understand.

Lu Xiaofeng could understand, all right. Not only that, but he could also understand Old Sabre Honcho the person.

"If I were you, I would have done the same," he said gently. "I think he must be an extraordinary man."

Widow Hua let out a long breath, as though she had just set down a very heavy burden. To know that there is still someone in this world who understands your pain and anguish is still a pretty good thing.

She gazed at Lu Xiaofeng, her eyes filled with gratitude and gratification. "Ever since coming here, I've not been so happy like I am today. Here, I'll toast you, three times."

"We'll be drunk if we drink more."

"What's the worry?" She raised her cup. "If I could get drunk, I'd be really grateful to you."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "To be honest, I'd long wanted to get rip-roaring drunk, just this once."

So they ended up being drunk on the bed.

They held each other, mumbling words in their drunken stupor that other people would never be able to understand, because in their hearts they were lonely and had too many knots they were unable to untangle.

Although they were holding each other tightly, their hearts were pure like a child's; there was probably no other time in their lives that they were so pure and honest.

What then was this sort of feeling?

Youth was dying and the past was best left forgotten. A woman who had suffered abuse and humiliation, a man with no roots... who on this earth could understand your feelings?

Both of you have been driven into such circumstances, but since you have met, why should you need other people to understand your feelings?

Outside the window, the night was deep, and so was the fog.

The window was not closed tightly and in the cold fog there suddenly appeared a figure, whose eyes were filled with enmity, jealousy and hatred.

Then, through the crack in the window, there appeared a blowpipe.

A black blowpipe, puffing out dark purple smoke.

The fog dissipated, and even those who were not drunk were now intoxicated, they had no choice.

This person was confident of it, because what he used was the “Bone and Soul Corroding Powder”, the most effective of intoxicating drugs. He had used it thirteen times – it had never failed him.

(Translated by Ren Wo Xing)

When Lu Xiaofeng and Widow Hua woke up, they were no longer lying on the spacious, soft bed.

Cellars are cold and moist. They were lying in the corner of one such cellar. Who knew how they got here?

Only one person knew.

There was one stool in the cellar. Cousin sat on top of this stool. He coldly stared at them, his eyes filled with venom and jealousy.

Upon seeing him, Widow Hua couldn't refrain from shouting, "You!"

"Are you surprised?"

"I really am." Widow Hua sneered. "I didn't imagine that a disciple of the Bashan Swordsman actually stoops to using this sort of anesthetic fragrance."

"There are many things that are outside of your imagination," Cousin smiled.

"But by now, I've come to understand everything."

Everyone who came to this place had signed a contract. The Old Sabre Honcho's contracts were always safe and reliable.

But in recent years, in the Mansion of Spirits, there were many people who suddenly disappeared without a trace. No one knew who it was who had gotten rid of them!

"It's you." Widow Hua pronounced her verdict. "Only now do I realize that it's your doing!"

Cousin didn't deny it.

"Unfortunately, no one could have imagined that it was me." He smiled. "This time, after I kill the two of you, no one will suspect me."

He was very confident. "Because everyone will place their suspicions upon Hook."

Widow Hua didn't deny it either.

Virtually everyone in the Mansion of Spirits knew that Hook lusted for her, and also knew that Hook wanted to kill Lu Xiaofeng.

This wouldn't be the first nor the last time that a man would commit murder due to jealousy.

Widow Hua said, "Actually, I know that you hate me."

Cousin said, "Oh?"

Widow Hua said, "Because you like men, but men like me."

Cousin laughed. "Maybe I have other reasons as well."

Widow Hua said, "What reasons?"

Cousin laughed in a strange way. "Maybe I just want to help Hook give vent to his frustrations."

But as he laughed, someone above their cellar laughed as well. "Or maybe you've just come to realize that ole Hook is right above you and

could hook your brains out at any time."

Housekeeper had arrived as well.

Like all housekeepers the world around, whenever this person appeared, a sour, worried look was always on his face. But Hook was laughing very happily.

Cousin was also laughing, but his laughter was very unhappy.

Although Hai Qikuo didn't hook him in the skull, he had hooked him in the arm. Lifting him up high, it seemed as though he was raising up a piece of dead meat. Naturally, this was a very unhappy sort of feeling.

There is a type of person in this world who rejoices in the misery of others. Hai Qikuo just so happened to be this type of person.

Smiling, he said, "Didn't you say, just now, that you plan on pushing the blame for this event onto me?"

Cousin didn't deny it. He couldn't deny it.

Hai Qikuo said, "Because you wanted to kill them, but you were afraid that the Old Sabre Honcho wouldn't agree."

Cousin didn't deny this either.

Hai Qikuo said, "To be honest, I feel the same way."

Cousin didn't understand. "You feel the same way?"

Hai Qikuo said, "I also want to kill Lu Xiaofeng, and I am also afraid that the Old Sabre Honcho wouldn't agree to it. There's only one difference between the two of us."

Cousin couldn't resist asking, "What difference?"

Hai Qikuo said, "My luck is better than yours. I found someone to be my scapegoat."

Cousin actually understood everything, but he still played along and asked, "Who?"

Hai Qikuo said, "You."

Cousin said, "You want me to kill Lu Xiaofeng for you?"

Hai Qikuo said, "Are you unwilling?"

Cousin said, "Why would I be? I wanted to kill them anyhow. Otherwise, why would I go to the trouble of tying them up?"

Hai Qikuo said, "Previously, if you killed them, I would've become your scapegoat. But now?"

Cousin forced out a smile. "Now, if I don't kill them, you will kill me."

Hai Qikuo laughed loudly. "You really are a discerning person. That's why I've always liked you."

Cousin said, "If I were to kill them, you would be willing to let me go?"

Hai Qikuo said, "I can let you go right now. No matter what, you won't be able to escape me."

He released his hook.

Cousin relaxed slightly. Turning around, he looked at him. A smile crept out onto his face. He suddenly asked, "Tell me, do I look like a very excitable person who isn't able to keep his cool?"

Hai Qikuo said, "You do not."

Cousin said, "Do I know that Widow Hua is a very formidable woman, one who is dangerous to anger?"

Hai Qikuo said, "I do."

Cousin said, "Then why did I use poison to incapacitate her earlier?"

Hai Qikuo said, "Why?"

Cousin's smile became very strange and sinister. "Because I wanted you to believe that my martial arts are very poor."

Hai Qikuo no longer was smiling. "And in reality?"

Cousin said, "In reality, I can kill you with just a single stance!"

He said a total of eleven words in that sentence. By the seventh word, he had made his move. By the final word, he had already killed Hai Qikuo.

His attack was fast yet effective. In actuality, no one was able to see how he made his move; the only clue was two heavy, nauseating sounds, which sounded similar to a butcher's blade cutting into dead flesh. And then, like a piece of dead meat, Hai Qikuo collapsed.

Lu Xiaofeng and Widow Hua were shocked. But Housekeeper was even more shocked.

Cousin dusted his hands off. Smiling, he said, "I've always heard that the three hall-leaders of the Phoenix Tail Sect are all extraordinary figures, especially the chief hall-leader, Gao Tao. But unfortunately, to this very day, I've never had the good fortune of witnessing the awe-inspiring techniques that you used to awe the martial world."

Housekeeper, who always looked sour and worried, now looked as though he were about to cry. "What sort of awe-inspiring techniques do I have? The only skill I have is in helping others take care of their domestic issues."

Cousin said, "You don't know how to kill?"

Housekeeper immediately shook his head. "No, I do not."

Cousin let out a long sigh. "Then you might as well hurry up and let me kill you."

Housekeeper let out a long sigh as well. His body suddenly flipped into the air and in the blink of an eye, forty or fifty different hidden weapons shot out. Filling the sky with their cold gleam, they all shot towards Cousin.

Turns out, this person wore countless hidden weapons on his body, all of which could be shot out instantly.

There were definitely less than ten people who could shoot out that many hidden weapons instantly.

There were even fewer people who would be able to dodge that many hidden weapons.

But unfortunately, Cousin just so happened to be one of those few people who could dodge this weapons. Not only had he long ago calculated that Housekeeper would use this attack, he had also prepared a way for dealing with it.

When the hidden weapons shot out, his sword was already there,

waiting.

A sword flash rose up and chopped through all of the hidden weapons. With another flash of the sword, Housekeeper collapsed as well. Only after collapsing did the blood begin to flow from his wound.

Only after the blood began to flow did Lu Xiaofeng let out a held breath. "So this would be Bashan's Seven-Sevens Forty-Nine Strikes of the Dancing Wind Willow Sword?"

Cousin said, "Just so."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "So you are the one and only true heir of the Bashan Swordsman. You are Gu Feiyun?"

Cousin said, "I am indeed."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "Bashan's divine sword arts definitely are incredible."

Cousin said, "It always is."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "But I don't understand. How could a person like you also be forced to the point of no return by Ximen Chuixue?"

Cousin said, "And you also don't understand why I killed them, but not you, right?"

Lu Xiaofeng truly did not.

Cousin chuckled. "The logic behind this is actually extremely simple. It's because I never wanted to kill you to begin with."

Lu Xiaofeng didn't understand.

Cousin said, "The Old Sabre Honcho always believed that our organization was extremely secretive, but in the martial world, at least three people are aware of it. The very first is my venerable teacher."

Lu Xiaofeng's countenance changed. "Then you..."

Cousin said, "I was sent by my sect here to be a spy. Because although we knew of the existence of the Mansion of Spirits, we didn't know any of its secrets."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "So they intentionally put you in a position where Ximen Chuixue would force you on a path with no return?"

Cousin said, "That entire event was nothing more than a scheme. They had calculated long ago that Ximen Chuixue would intervene in this affair, and had also calculated that someone from the Mansion of Spirits would come to me first and offer me a contract."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Why?"

Cousin said, "Because I had just inherited a significant inheritance. At

any point in time, I can withdraw over a hundred thousand taels of silver."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "The price of the contract here is a hundred thousand taels?"

Cousin said, "In order to purchase one's life, a hundred thousand taels isn't an overly large sum."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "It definitely is not."

Life was priceless. What was more valuable to a person than his own life?

Cousin said, "When they ordered me to come here, the most important command was to investigate the Old Sabre Honcho's background."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Even they do not know the details about the Old Sabre Honcho?"

Cousin said, "No one knows."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "What about you?"

Cousin laughed wryly. "Although I've been here for quite a while, I've never even seen his real face, so I've urgently been searching for a person."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Who?"

Cousin said, "The person who will come to my rescue."

He explained, "They originally had agreed to send someone to bring me out as soon as possible. But all the newcomers find it very difficult to move about freely, and it would also be hard for them to discover that Gu Feiyun is actually 'Cousin'.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "You were really anxious, so you had no choice but to seek them out instead."

Cousin said, "I've already sought out twelve people."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "But you were wrong about all of them."

Cousin said, "So I had no choice but to kill them so as to silence them."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "And so this time, you believe I'm the person who has come to bring you out?"

Cousin stared at him. One word at a time, he slowly said, "I just hope that this time, I'm not wrong."

Lu Xiaofeng let out a sigh. "I also hope that this time, you aren't wrong."

Cousin was still staring at him. His eyes had turned as cold and sharp as

knife blades. He suddenly asked, "Aside from my master, the Swordsman of Bashan, who are the two others? Who asked you to come? What is your code name?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I can't say."

Cousin said, "Because you don't know!"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. Forcing a smile, he said, "I'm very apologetic. Looks like this time, you are wrong yet again."

There was a lamp lit in the cellar. This was spring, and so it shouldn't have seemed too cold down there.

But Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt a wave of cold horror fill him. It wasn't because Cousin was gripping his sword with his hand yet again. Rather, it was because another person suddenly appeared in the cellar. A man wearing a gray robe, who wore a bamboo hat on his head.

Just as Cousin gripped his sword, the man appeared behind him.

Lu Xiaofeng saw this man. Widow Hua also saw this man. But Cousin himself did not.

This person was like a ghostly spirit, with form but without substance.

An unusually designed bamboo hat covered his face. Lu Xiaofeng was totally unable to see his face, but could already guess his identity. Widow

Hua's face was expressionless, but a look of joy appeared in her eyes as well.

This person was waving at her.

Cousin seemed to have realized that something was amiss. He suddenly turned around.

But no one was there. Not even a shadow could be seen.

This person remained behind him like a shadow, then waved at Widow Hua again.

By the time Cousin turned around to face her, she had already calmed down. Icily, she said, "Do you want to kill Lu Xiaofeng first? Or kill me first?"

Cousin slowly sat down. He leisurely said, "Neither of you look like you are afraid of death."

Widow Hua said, "Since we have no choice but to die, what's the point of being afraid? Only..."

Cousin said, "Only you don't want to die without even know what's going on."

Widow Hua assented to this. His words struck a chord in her heart.

Cousin said, "So you want to ask me, aside from my master, the Swordsman of Bashan, who else knows this secret?"

Widow Hua said, "Since I'm going to die no matter what, why not tell me?"

Cousin stared at her. Suddenly, he began to laugh, very loudly.

Widow Hua said, "Why are you laughing?"

Cousin said, "I'm laughing at you. You know the answer already. Why ask me?"

Widow Hua said, "What do you mean? What do I know?"

Cousin said, "Aside from my master, there are two people who know. One is the Wooden Taoist. The other is your old man. You clearly are just the same as me, someone who was sent here as a spy. Why put on an act?"

Widow Hua's face changed.

Cousin said, "By now, I imagine you already know what kind of a person the Old Sabre Honcho is. Because you are a woman. You can accompany him to bed and sleep with him."

Widow Hua said, "You want me to pull me under as well?"

Cousin said, "Actually, I've always known your secret. The only reason I did this today was because I set a trap for you. I wanted to entice you into spilling your secrets. I'd rather kill a hundred innocents than let a single spy live."

Widow Hua stared at him. She suddenly let out a sigh. "So you aren't trying to pull me under. You are just trying to find a scapegoat for yourself."

Cousin said, "Why would I need to find a scapegoat?"

Widow Hua said, "Because although you didn't see the Old Sabre Honcho, you know that he's already here."

She sighed again before continuing. "You really are a talented person. But there's something you don't understand."

Cousin said, "What?"

Widow Hua said, "This really is a scheme, but the person who fell into it wasn't me. It was you."

Cousin said, "Oh?"

Widow Hua said, "The Old Sabre Honcho and I had suspected you long ago, which is why we set up this trap to catch you. If you believe that I really was poisoned by you, you are wrong about that as well."

Dusting off her sleeves, she slowly stood up. Someone poisoned by the Powder of Rapture would find it difficult to purge the poison that fast. But she actually stood up.

But Cousin continued to sit on that stool without moving. He suddenly turned to look at Lu Xiaofeng. "What do you think?"

Lu Xiaofeng let out a sigh. Forcing out a smile, he said, "All of you are geniuses. I respect all of you."

Cousin suddenly laughed loudly. "For someone like Lu Xiaofeng to respect me, even as I die, I, Gu Feiyun, feel content!"

He said the word die, and he really did die, just like that. It was even faster than when he killed others.

His sword flipped around, his blood spurted out, and he collapsed.

He definitely couldn't let himself survive and allow others to force information out of him.

If you want to find out someone else's secrets, you had best prepare to be willing to sacrifice your own life.

Widow Hua frowned. "I didn't expect him to not fear death at all."

The Old Sabre Honcho said, "People who are afraid of death can't enter his line of work at all. People who are overly intelligent cannot, either."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "There's another sort of person who cannot as well."

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Who?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "The type of person who, no matter where he goes, finds lots of trouble for himself. Even if he doesn't want to cause trouble, trouble still manages to find him."

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Are you this sort of person?"

Lu Xiaofeng forced out a laugh. "I've always understood myself very well."

Old Sabre Honcho said, "You definitely did bring a lot of trouble to my doorstep..."

Lu Xiaofeng interrupted him. "But you definitely cannot kill me."

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Why is that?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Because I didn't want to come here. You were the one who brought me in. So even though others can kill me, you cannot, because I am your guest."

Old Sabre Honcho grew silent. He slowly said, "I can spare you, but you have to promise me one thing!"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "What?"

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Seal your mouth as tightly as a closed bottle. Forever maintain your silence regarding what you learned of this place."

Lu Xiaofeng immediately said, "I accept."

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Fine, I'll trust you. Leave!"

Lu Xiaofeng was startled. "You want me to leave?"

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Even if a host cannot kill his own guest, he can at least ask his guest to depart."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "But outside..."

Old Sabre Honcho said, "No matter who is waiting for you outside, at least it's better than dying inside."

Lu Xiaofeng spoke no further. He could tell that no matter what he said, it would be useless. So he left.

But Old Sabre Honcho suddenly called him back. "But at the very least, you were my guest, and at the very least, you didn't sell me out. So if there's anything you want, I'll let you take it with you!"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "No matter what I ask for?"

Old Sabre Honcho said, "As long as you can take it with you."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "What if I want to take her?"

The 'her' he wanted to take away was Widow Hua!

Old Sabre Honcho shut his mouth. After a long time, he slowly said, "You can take her away as well. But in the future, you had best never let me see you again!"

The ravine was still filled with dreary, misty clouds. In any circumstance, it would be extremely difficult to find that narrow, steel-chain path. To pass across it would be even harder.

And after crossing it? The world within the ravine was the world of the Mansion of Spirits. And outside? How many life-threatening dangers were outside?

Lu Xiaofeng let out a long sigh. He suddenly laughed.

Widow Hua looked at him. She couldn't help but ask, "Aren't you afraid?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Afraid of what?"

Widow Hua said, "Death."

She gently held his hand. "Aren't you afraid that as soon as you leave this ravine, you'll die under someone's sword?"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled. "I've already died once. So what if I die a second time?"

Widow Hua laughed as well. No matter what, at least they had left the Mansion of Spirits, left this world of the dead.

Widow Hua said in a soft voice, "I've often thought to myself that so long as I had the chance to once more truly live again, even if it was just for a day, I would be utterly satisfied."

Chapter 8 – Lu Xiaofeng commissioned

Translated by Foxs

There was no grass on this mountain rock, the towering peak was as sharp as blade.

Widow Hua suddenly came to a halt; she looked down at her feet. There was a trace of blood flowing from the soles of her slender, delicate, and tender feet.

"You did not wear shoes?"

"No." Widow Hua was still laughing, "I rarely walked."

She was following him without wearing any shoes. In fact, she left without taking anything with her.

"You did not ask for anything, as long as I am coming with you, what else do I want?" Although her face was white because of the pain, her laughter was still very gentle and soft. "In this world, what could be more valuable than true love?"

Looking at her, Lu Xiaofeng felt a surge of tenderness welling up in his heart like warm spring torrent. He lifted her up and carried her through the mountain rock. She whispered in his ear, "Ximen Chuixue must be thinking that you are dead by now. If you want, I am sure we can find a quiet place to live, and I am sure we can live for more than one day."

"Originally I was determined to die for Old Sabre Honcho, but then I

met you." She continued, "And he did not try to stop me either; therefore, I hope from now on you will forget this person Widow Hua, my surname is Liu, Liu Qingqing." [qing means green/dark green]

The grass ahead was green, the trees and leaves were also green.

Lu Xiaofeng did not walk directly ahead; he did not forget that that was the man-eating forest.

They sat down on the hillside outside the forest. On the lush, green grass, he saw dead leaves.

It was still spring, how could there be dead leaves?

Lu Xiaofeng picked up a dead leaf. As soon as he looked at it, his palm was suddenly wet with cold sweat.

Liu Qingqing immediately saw his peculiar expression; she immediately asked, "What is it?"

Lu Xiaofeng pointed to the stem of the leaf, "This leaf was not blown by the wind," he said.

The stem of the leaf was cut, clean and tidy.

Liu Qingqing frowned. "Not by the wind, could it be sword blade?" she said.

"Not sword blade either," Lu Xiaofeng said, "It's sword aura!"

Liu Qingqing's countenance changed.

-- Whose sword could emit such a sharp sword aura?

Lu Xiaofeng picked up a piece of feather from the grass; it was also cut by a sword aura.

There were birds outside the forest. Birds can also allay one's hunger. But how many people in the world were able to shoot down a bird just by using sword aura? Other than Ximen Chuixue, who else had that kind of ability?

Liu Qingqing no longer smiled, "He has not left?"

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "He has always been known as a man who doesn't give up easily."

Liu Qingqing looked down and said, "I know what kind of man he is; I have seen him."

She suddenly looked up again, "But we don't need to fear him, with the two of us joining hands, could it be that we can't handle him, one person?"

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head.

"You are afraid of him?" Liu Qingqing asked, "Why?"

Lu Xiaofeng looked down. "Because there is shame in my heart," he sadly said.

"Did you really do that sort of thing?" Liu Qingqing asked.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, "There is time when anybody can make a mistake," he replied.

"But you are not a fool," Liu Qingqing said.

"Sometimes someone who is not a fool cannot avoid being a fool," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Liu Qingqing's expression grew even bleaker, "You think we have no chance in getting out of this forest alive?"

"That's why now we only have one way to go," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Which way?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"The way back," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Liu Qingqing looked at him in shock, "You mean back to the Mansion of Spirits?" she asked.

With a bitter smile Lu Xiaofeng said, "No matter what is waiting for me there, it is always better than to die in this forest."

The valley was still shrouded in clouds and mist, dreary and hazy; going back was similarly not easy as coming out.

On the mountain rock directly ahead, someone was flying toward them as if he was riding on the wind; it was precisely the Soul Collector.

Although he had no face and no name, yet he had hands, he had sword.

The sword was already in his hand, the sword was already unsheathed.

He looked coldly at Lu Xiaofeng and said, "Since you already left, why come back?"

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled, "Because I am homesick."

"This is not your home," Soul Collector said.

"Originally it was not, but now it is," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Because I have nowhere else to go."

"Do you see what's in my hand?" Soul Collector asked.

"It looks like a sword," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"If you can defeat the sword in my hand, I'll let you pass," Soul Collector said.

"I advise you not to try," Lu Xiaofeng said.

With a cold laugh Soul Collector said, "You have confidence that you can defeat me?"

"I don't have any confidence," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Not even a bit. But I have confidence that I can at least take ten moves of yours."

"And what if you can take ten moves of mine?" Soul Collector asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I have confidence that within ten moves I can tell your martial art background." He chuckled again before continuing, "I believe you won't want anybody to find out your martial art background."

Soul Collector closed his mouth. The veins on the back of his hand that was holding the sword were bulging like vipers.

Yet Lu Xiaofeng did not even cast him a single glance, he simply walked forward confidently under his sword, Liu Qingqing could only follow.

The viper-like veins on his hand twitched, the tip of his sword also trembled with a cold light.

Lu Xiaofeng did not look back. Liu Qingqing could feel her neck was wet; she noticed that all over Lu Xiaofeng's body, from top to bottom,

there was not the least bit sign of alertness. If this sword was thrust forward, the tip that was trembling with cold light would be enough to take his life.

Yet the Soul Collector did not seem to realize that; he simply watched Lu Xiaofeng walked away until he was far, and only then did the sword in his hand fell. In the midst of a loud dragon-like roar sparks flew everywhere as a large rock split into four pieces under his sword.

Liu Qingqing stole a glance backward; she saw his back was drenched in sweat.

On this mountain, each piece of rock was as hard as refined steel. Even using iron hammer or sharp axe, one might not necessarily be able to chip the rock, yet this sword's sharpness and power were simply too frightening.

It was not until they were out of sight did she finally breathe again. "Did you see that sword?" she asked.

"Nothing remarkable," Lu Xiaofeng indifferently replied.

Liu Qingqing could not help asking, "What kind of swordsmanship would you consider remarkable then?"

"If he were able to calmly retract his sword, that would be considered remarkable," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Just now in furious rage the Soul Collector transmitted all his power

onto the tip of his sword; just like a fully-drawn bow, he had no choice but to release it. Therefore, as the sword struck, naturally the power was astonishing. However, it also proved that he was not able to control his own anger; he was not able to release and retract his power freely. If he were able to retract his sword calmly, then he would have reached perfection [orig. the stove fire has turned bright green].

Liu Qingqing came from prestigious school; naturally she understood this principle. Yet she still could not resist asking, "Even if there is nothing remarkable about that sword, but if it was used against you, do you have any confidence that you would be able to evade?"

"No," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"So you are confident that he won't kill you?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"Again, no," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Yet you appeared to be totally unfazed?" Liu Qingqing asked.

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled. "When a man is at the end of his tether, he should always take a little risk."

Liu Qingqing sighed. But before she said anything, they saw a man in grey clothes and a bamboo rain hat on his head, walking leisurely ahead of them, with his hands behind his back.

"Old Sabre Honcho!"

Lu Xiaofeng called out, and without waiting for an answer he tried to catch up. Yet although the man in grey walked in strolling pace, he just could not catch up.

He was about to give up when the man in grey ahead suddenly said, "Clearly you are not the kind of person who casually takes risk with your life; you were certain that he would not kill you, you had confidence in this matter."

Lu Xiaofeng did not deny; he could not deny. He suddenly realized that no matter what, it would be very difficult to conceal anything from Old Sabre Honcho.

Old Sabre Honcho continued, "What gives you such confidence?"

Lu Xiaofeng could only tell the truth, "I could see clearly that his face was cut off with sword blade. Based on his swordsmanship, there is only one person in the world who was able to cut his face like that."

"Who?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

"He himself," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Old Sabre Honcho let out a cold laugh.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "He would rather destroy his own face than letting others recognizing him; naturally he would not let me recognizing his

background. Therefore, I was certain that he would not make his move."

Old Sabre Honcho suddenly turned around to stare at him; even under the bamboo rain hat, his eyes were still as sharp as blade. "You have such confidence, was it because you have already figured out who he is?"

Lu Xiaofeng forced a laugh. "I just happen to remember something," he said.

"Speak up!" Old Sabre Honcho said.

"Twenty years ago," Lu Xiaofeng began, "The most prestigious swordsman in Wudang was Shi He, the most promising candidate to succeed Wudang unification effort was also him. Yet on the eve of him receiving the Sect Leadership, there was news spreading in Jianghu that he died suddenly ..."

"At that time he was at the prime of his life; a middle-aged man with such internal and external cultivation like him, how could he die suddenly?" Lu Xiaofeng continued, "Therefore, inevitably Jianghu people were doubtful about the news of his death. At that time rumors were abound; some even went too far by saying that because he did not keep his purity in following the rules, he was expelled from his school, and thus he killed himself in anger. But all along I suspected that he is still alive; it's just that no one has ever seen him."

Old Sabre Honcho was listening calmly. Only after Lu Xiaofeng finished did he laugh coldly and said, "You are not supposed to come back to see me either."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "But I also know for sure that you are not going to kill me."

"What makes you think that?" Old Sabre Honcho asked sternly.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I know that right now you are looking for people, and you ought to know that I am a very useful person."

"Why would I want to use you?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "To accomplish big things, you must employ useful people."

"How do you know I want to accomplish big things?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "To establish a base like this, I don't know how much manpower and resources you have already spent; maintaining it is even more difficult. Even if you charged everybody here with a hundred-thousand taels contract, you may not necessarily be able to deal with your friends. Even if you can make a bit of money, based on your character, I doubt it that you would spend so much effort just to make an insignificant amount of money."

"Go on," Old Sabre Honcho said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "So I conclude that by doing all this, you must have a plan. Based on your ability and wisdom, naturally you want to accomplish big things."

Old Sabre Honcho stared at him with cold eyes; his gaze was even more piercing. Suddenly he turned around and said, "Follow me."

At the end of winding path was a stone building that looked ancient and austere; the furnishing inside was equally simple and unadorned, so much so that it had a gloomy forest feeling, obviously this house was rarely inhabited. But right now there were three people waiting inside; three people that were supposed to be dead.

Hook, Cousin, and Housekeeper, three people were standing next to a sacrificial table under a drooping yellow curtain. All three were wearing some kind of malicious, crafty smile on their faces, as they looked at Lu Xiaofeng with the corner of their eyes.

Although Lu Xiaofeng struggled hard to maintain his composure, he could not refrain from looking shocked.

"Do you understand it now?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "I don't understand, I don't understand at all."

Old Sabre Honcho said, "From start to finish, this is actually a trap."

Lu Xiaofeng still did not understand.

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Everything they did, it was my doing, I only

wanted to test you.”

“You suspected that I am an undercover spy?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“I suspected everybody,” Old Sabre Honcho said, “Everybody here has to go through some kind of test. Those whom Gu Feiyun killed were those who did not pass the test.”

At last Lu Xiaofeng understood, “You intentionally let me go, it was also part of the test, to see whether I was really driven by Ximen Chuixue and had nowhere to go.”

“If you did not come back,” Old Sabre Honcho said, “by this time you must have been dead in that man-eating forest.”

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, “You have already anticipated that I might take Liu Qingqing with me, hence you prepared to have her kill me.”

“That was actually unexpected,” Old Sabre Honcho said, “If you did not come back, she would have died with you!”

Lu Xiaofeng could not resist turning around, Liu Qingqing was staring at him. Neither of them say anything, because whatever it was they wanted to say, they have said it all through their eyes.

She did not blame him, he did not feel guilty either.

It was the most wonderful feeling in the world: no need to blame, no

need to feel guilty.

Old Sabre Honcho quietly watched them. He waited until Lu Xiaofeng turned back again before he said slowly, "Now do you understand why I had to do what I did?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. "You wanted to see whether I am worthy to be used by you," he said.

"You are absolutely right," Old Sabre Honcho said.

The tone of his voice suddenly became very gentle, "Both your martial art skill and resourcefulness are not bad, but the most important thing is that you did not lie in front of me."

With a wry laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "Since I know for sure that I cannot lie to you, why bother lying?"

"You are a smart man, and I like smart people," Old Sabre Honcho said, "Therefore, from now on, you are my partner. As long as you don't leave this Mansion, you may do whatever you want. I believe such a smart man like you would never do anything stupid." [The word 'Mansion' here actually carries a lot broader meaning: a village, a building complex, a cluster of houses, *etc.* Not just a single 'mansion'.]

He turned toward Housekeeper, "Pass it down, arrange a banquet tonight to welcome him."

Housekeeper withdrew, Cousin and Hook also withdrew.

Old Sabre Honcho suddenly said, "Your house is torn down, starting today you may stay at Qingqing's place."

Lu Xiaofeng hesitated; forcing a smile he said, "You ..."

Old Sabre Honcho did not allow him to finish, he said, "I am already old; it is always easy for an old man to forget a lot of things."

He stood up and turned around to face the shrine underneath the drooping yellow curtain. "Only one thing I still cannot forget," he slowly said, "When this all ends, I will tell you."

Lu Xiaofeng did not ask, he knew that Old Sabre Honcho's word was a command!

Not only the food and wine were abundant, they were of the finest quality. There were twelve kinds of wine, the format of the banquet was an ancient format, eighteen long tables were arranged in 'U' shape [orig. half a character '口' - kou, mouth], Old Sabre Honcho sat in the middle, and on his left sat Lu Xiaofeng.

Naturally everyone's view on Lu Xiaofeng was not the same as two days ago; not only because he was the honorary guest of the banquet, but also because he had suddenly become Old Sabre Honcho's trusted aide.

The first one to stand up and offer him a toast was the Hook, Hai Qikuo, followed by Cousin, Housekeeper, and Dugu Mei.

All along Ye Ling was the only one who never cast him a single glance, because the one sitting next to him was Liu Qingqing. This man-eating widow also seemed to have changed; becoming quiet and gentle.

Old Sabre Honcho was still wearing that odd-looking bamboo rain hat, so that even Lu Xiaofeng, who sat right next to him could not see his face clearly.

He ate very little, he drank even less, and did not say too much either; yet whoever looked at him did so with absolute obedience and total respect.

The number of people attending the banquet was more than the last one, altogether there were fifty-nine people. Although Lu Xiaofeng did not know most of them, it was not difficult for him to imagine that in the old days these people must have had glorious history; if not the son or disciple of filthy-rich families, they must have been towering hero who dominated the Wulin world in the past. Not only people of high status, their martial art skill must be pretty good; otherwise they would not be qualified to enter this Mansion of Spirits.

"Are all people present?" Lu Xiaofeng asked quietly.

"Only two are not here," Liu Qingqing replied equally quietly, "One is the Soul Collector; he never mingles with other people."

"And who is the other one?"

"Ye Ling's older sister, Ye Xue [lit. snow]," Liu Qingqing said, "She is fond

of hunting, oftentimes she went out for more than ten days in a stretch."

"How did she have free access to come and go?"

"The Old Sabre Honcho made a concession with her," Liu Qingqing laughed coldly, "That woman is a freak, whatever she wants to do, nobody can stop her. Even when she is here, she never speaks with anybody."

"Why?"

"Because she always think that she is much stronger than anybody." It was obvious that Liu Qingqing was very reluctant to talk about her, she was even more reluctant to talk about her with Lu Xiaofeng. As a matter of fact, they were not able to continue talking about her; because they had just been talking about Cao Cao, Cao Cao[1] has arrived.

Suddenly, a leopard flew in from outside the door, and landed heavily in front of their table. Ye Xue came in right behind this leopard. As soon as the leopard landed, Lu Xiaofeng immediately saw her.

She looked just like the leopard; beautiful, agile, cold and cruel. The only difference was that the leopard was already dead; it died in her hands.

It was the thirteenth leopard that died in her hands. Nearly all leopards in the vicinity of the valley died in her hands.

She loved to hunt; even more, she loved to hunt leopards.

Why do people always love to hunt and kill those which are similar to them?

Among the beasts, the most agile and ferocious, the most difficult to deal with is precisely the leopard. Even hunters with extremely vast experience may not necessarily be daring enough to hunt leopard single-handedly; very few people actually dared to do such a foolish and dangerous thing.

Yet not only she dared to do it, she was successful in doing it.

She was a quiet and reserved woman, yet she was able to hunt leopard. She looked beautiful and delicate, yet she had a leopard-like agility and coldness.

These different kinds of complex and contradictory character brought up a kind of strange charm about her. Even Lu Xiaofeng has never seen this kind of woman. When he saw her, he nearly forgot Liu Qingqing, who was sitting by his side.

Ye Xue kept her gaze toward the Old Sabre Honcho; with her pale face, her pale lips, she suddenly said, "Do you know that my cousin (sic) is dead?" [Translator's note: Earlier Ye Ling said Ye Guhong was her big brother, but if Ye Xue was her big sister, it would mean Ye Xue and Ye Guhong were siblings.]

Old Sabre Honcho nodded.

"Do you know who killed him?" Ye Xue asked.

Old Sabre Honcho nodded again.

"Who is it?" Ye Xue asked.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart skipped a beat. A woman who hunted leopards, if she wanted to exact revenge, would not stop at anything.

And right now he did not want to be the leopard she hunted.

But Old Sabre Honcho's reply was totally beyond his expectation, "It was Ximen Chuixue!"

Ye Xue's countenance became even paler, her hands suddenly clenched into fists.

Old Sabre Honcho said slowly, "You must remember what your Gege [older brother] had told you, if he died under Ximen Chuixue's hands, you must never seek revenge against him, because it was definitely a fair duel."

-- It was also because he did not wish anybody who avenged him should die under Ximen Chuixue's sword!

Ye Xue's lips trembled, her clenched fists were also trembling. Suddenly she sat down. She sat down on the floor. "Give me wine!" she said.

The one delivering the drink to her was the Housekeeper; it was an earthen jar of wine, which seal has just been broken.

Ye Xue did not even look at him; she said coldly, "You'd better go away, the farther the better!"

Unexpectedly Housekeeper did indeed go away, he went very far away.

"Who'd want to drink with me?" Ye Xue asked.

"Me," Hai Qikuo scrambled to answer.

"You are not fit," Ye Xue said.

Old Sabre Honcho suddenly tapped Lu Xiaofeng. Lu Xiaofeng slowly stood up and walked over to her.

Finally Ye Xue gave him a look, "You are Lu Xiaofeng?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded.

"Can you drink?" Ye Xue asked.

"I can," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Alright," Ye Xue said, "Get some bowls, big bowls."

The bowls were very big. She drank one bowl, Lu Xiaofeng drank one bowl. She did not say anything, Lu Xiaofeng also did not open his mouth. She no longer looked at Lu Xiaofeng, Lu Xiaofeng did not look at her either.

Thus the two of them sat face to face on the ground like that; you drink one bowl, I drink one bowl.

One bowl was at least eight taels. [one tael is approx. 50grams.] After a dozen or so bowls, surprisingly her countenance did not even change.

When the jar was empty, she stood up; without even looking back she walked out the door. She did not say anything; not even one word.

When Lu Xiaofeng stood up, his head was a bit dizzy.

"How was it?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

With a wry smile Lu Xiaofeng said, "I did not expect she has such a good wine capacity, really unexpected."

Old Sabre Honcho suddenly sighed. "I did not expect it either," he said, "I have never seen her drink."

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked. "You have not seen her drink?"

"Nobody has ever seen her drink," Old Sabre Honcho said, "In all her

life, this was the first time she drank wine.”

For someone who was drunk, there is absolutely nothing in the world more enticing than a bed. Especially if the bed was very big, and very comfortable.

Too bad there was someone who clearly did not want him to lie down comfortably in the bed.

As soon as he entered the room, Liu Qingqing was already sitting on the floor with an earthen jar of wine, “Who’d want to drink with me?” she asked.

Lu Xiaofeng looked forward, he looked backward, he looked to the right, he looked to the left, and then with a bitter laugh said, “It seems like I am the only one in this room.”

“Can you drink?” Liu Qingqing asked.

“Can I not drink?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“You can’t,” Liu Qingqing replied.

Lu Xiaofeng could only sit down to drink with her. When he sat down, he was already drunk.

He was really drunk.

When he woke up, Liu Qingqing was no longer in the room, he was lying on the bed, alone. Even his boots were still on. His head hurt so much that he felt as if it may burst at any moment.

He did not want to get up; he could not get up. But clearly someone was calling out to him from outside the window.

The window was pushed open. The man outside was Dugu Mei. "I've come here three times, watching you sleeping so well, I did not dare to wake you up."

"Why did you want to see me?"

"Nothing, just that I haven't seen you for a while, I wanted to chat with you."

No matter what, he was a friend. When a friend came to chat with Lu Xiaofeng, even if his head really burst open, he simply could not refuse.

"We'd better go out and talk. I am afraid to see that Widow Hua."

Outside was still foggy, cold and damp fog, but it was very effective to cure hangover. Although Dugu Mei's injury has been healing very well, he seemed to be a bit worried.

"Actually, I had been wanting to see you, I was afraid you might be angry with me."

"Why am I angry?"

"Because I was the one who introduced Hook and the others to you, I really did not know that they were going to harm you."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "Of course you didn't, you are my friend, all along you have been doing me a favor."

Dugu Mei hesitated; finally he found his courage and said, "But last night I did something wrong."

"What is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Dugu Mei said, "Last night I was also drunk, in my stupor I divulged the secret, and now those three knew that Ye Guhong died under your hands."

'Those three' were, naturally, Cousin, Hook, and Housekeeper.

Lu Xiaofeng could not laugh anymore.

Although they only met once, Lu Xiaofeng understood a person like Ye Xue very well; naturally he understood Ye Ling even better.

"They say that in this place, the most difficult people to be provoked are precisely those two sisters. If they knew this matter, they would definitely find you and staking everything they have to fight you." Dugu Mei was trying to be very tactful, "I know you are not afraid of them, but

it's easy to dodge the spear in the open, but hard to avoid a stab in the dark; therefore ..."

"Therefore what?"

"Therefore it would be best if you'd think of something to shut their mouths."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed again, he understood Dugu Mei's intention, "You want me to be a bit friendlier with them, and not set myself against them. If they want me to do something, it would be best if I don't refuse."

Dugu Mei stared at him; suddenly he grabbed Lu Xiaofeng's hand rather hard and said, "I am sorry."

After speaking those five words [我对不起你 – wo dui bu qi ni], he simply left.

Looking at his stooped back disappearing, Lu Xiaofeng really did not know whether this man was his friend, or someone who at any time could sell his friend?

But right now he only know one thing for sure:

-- Hook and the others would find him and have him doing something very soon.

But what were they going to have him do? He could not think about it,

he did not even dare to think about it, and he did not have time to think about it either, because right this time, a flash of sword, a lightning fast sword, was stabbing him.

By this time Dugu Mei had already left for some time, and Lu Xiaofeng was walking along a path, which very soon would lead him to the cottage where Liu Qingqing lived.

The sword flash came precisely from behind the eaves. Not only it was swift, it was also accurate and vicious too.

He had never expected that someone would ambush him at this place; he nearly did not have any leeway to parry or to evade.

Fortunately, he was Lu Xiaofeng. Fortunately, he still had his hands.

Suddenly he extended his two fingers and clamped.

-- There were thousands upon thousands of people on earth, each one had a pair of hands, each pair of hands had fingers.

But these two fingers of him were undoubtedly the most valuable; because these two fingers had saved him countless times.

This time was no exception.

Once the fingers clamped, the blade of the sword was caught between his fingers.

The ice-cold sword blade was strong and powerful, yet it was unable to struggle free from these two fingers. He looked up and saw a pair of cold, yet beautiful eyes.

-- Ye Xue was staring at him.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed inwardly. With a wry smile he said, "You knew?"

Ye Xue stared at him for a very long time before she slowly nodded and said, "Now I know that Lu Xiaofeng is worthy to be Lu Xiaofeng; finally I found the right person."

There was no hatred in her voice at all. Immediately Lu Xiaofeng tried to probe her out, "Did you come here looking for me, or did you come here to kill me?"

Ye Xue said, "I just want to see your world-famous consummate skill; if you can catch my sword, you are the person I have been looking for."

"And if I die under your hands?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"You deserve it," Ye Xue replied.

Lu Xiaofeng could not refrain from forcing a laugh. Since he had not died, naturally he could not help but ask, "So now I am the one you have been looking for?"

Ye Xue nodded. "Come with me," she said.

Walking along a winding path, passing through secluded and secret forest, and then over a short hillside, they heard the sound of running water.

The water was not flowing fast at all, by this time it was already collected into a small lake, surrounded by lush, green mountain; even the fog was light in this place. If one could sit quietly by the lakeside for half a day, one would forget a lot of worries in his mind.

"I never thought there is such a quiet, beautiful place within the Mansion of Spirits."

Oftentimes children have their own secret little world. This little world clearly belonged to Ye Xue. Why did she bring Lu Xiaofeng here?

"Actually, what is it that you want me to do?" Lu Xiaofeng could not help asking.

Ye Xue stood by the lake, while lifting her eyes onto the distant mountain, letting her soft hair, like a spring of water, loose on her back.

Her voice was also as soft and as quiet as the spring of water, but what she said was actually shocking. She said, "I want you to be my husband."

Lu Xiaofeng felt his breathing suddenly stopped.

She turned around to face him and fixed her gaze on him. Her eyes were clear and bright, just like the ripple of water on the middle of the lake.

"I am still a virgin," she continued, "No man has ever touched me."

She also guaranteed, "After I am marrying you, I won't let anybody touch me."

Lu Xiaofeng sucked a deep breath. "I believe you," he said.

"So you agree?" Ye Xue asked.

Lu Xiaofeng forced himself to laugh. "I am sure there are other conditions you want me to agree on," he said.

Ye Xue said, "The matter that I want you to do, it is also beneficial for you."

"At least I have the right to know what it is first?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Ye Xue's gentle and soft eyes suddenly shot a dagger; only deep hatred would produce that kind of sharp gaze. "I want you to help me killing Ximen Chuixue."

Lu Xiaofeng did not respond; this request was not completely outside his expectation.

"If we can find him," Ye Xue continued, "He will definitely make his move to kill you; because he won't give you a second chance to escape."

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "Basically, we don't need to go trying to find him. As soon as I leave this valley, he will immediately find me."

"I know," Ye Xue said, "If I go out trying to find him, it would be very difficult. If I want to find him, I must have him find me; that's the reason why I picked you."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "You want me to divert his attention, so that you have the opportunity to kill him."

Ye Xue did not deny. "He will never pay any attention to me," she said, "Because he hates you, and because he basically does not know who I am. As long as you can catch his sword blade, I definitely will be able to kill him."

"And if I miss?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Ye Xue said, "Dealing with Ximen Chuixue is actually a very dangerous thing to do, but I have given this matter a lot of thought. As long as you agree, we have at least seventy-percent chance of succeeding."

"Perhaps your chance is more than seventy-percent," Lu Xiaofeng said, "because even if I miss, you can still take the opportunity to kill him while his sword is embedded in my chest."

He chuckled again. But obviously the laughter was forced out. "I am sure you have also considered this point early on, that's why you can give me guarantee that later on you won't let anybody touching you, because you want me to die with peaceful heart."

Ye Xue did not deny either, "Indeed I have thought about it. Although your chance is really not great, I also know that you have always been a gambler; as long as anything's worth betting on, you will definitely lay down your bet."

Her clear and bright eyes became even deeper, just like an ocean attracting Lu Xiaofeng's eyes.

Only after a long, long time was he finally able to look away. Immediately he discovered that she was already stark naked.

The mountain peak was lush green, the lake was clear; she stood quietly over there, exuding an aura of unspeakable pride and beauty.

She deserved to be proud, because her virgin body was indeed completely flawless.

She just looked at Lu Xiaofeng, then, after a long time she slowly said, "As long as you agree, right now I am yours."

Her voice was brimming with confidence, because she believed that there was absolutely no man in the world could refuse her.

Lu Xiaofeng's breathing has stopped; it was a long, long time later that

he was finally able to speak, "If I refuse you, I am sure there will be a lot of people who'd think that I am crazy. But I ..."

Ye Xue's eyes narrowed, "But you refuse?"

"I just want you to know one thing," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Speak up," Ye Xue said.

"Your Gege did not die under Ximen Chuxue's sword at all," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"How did you know?" Ye Xue was emotional.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "When he died, I was standing right in front of him; the blood spilled by the sword almost splashed on me."

"Whose sword?" Ye Xue asked.

"His own!" Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Ye Xue suddenly screamed like crazy, "You lie, you lie ..."

Lu Xiaofeng waited until the echo in the valley disappeared before saying, "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and I actually am able to get you, why would I want to lie?"

His words was calm yet sharp, it went straight to penetrate her to the core.

And then he walked away. He went far, far away before looking back. From behind the willow branches he was still able to see her.

She was still standing motionlessly on the same place. It was as if the entire creation and this mysterious and beautiful creature had dissolved into one entity.

However, who would know the feeling in her heart?

[1] Cao Cao (155-220), famous statesman and general at the end of Han, noted poet and calligrapher, later warlord, founder and first king of Cao Wei, father of Emperor Cao Pi, the main villain of novel the Romance of Three Kingdoms.

Chapter 9 – Beauty’s favor

Translated by Foxs

Secluded, secret, serene lush-green valley; perfect, flawless virgin body, with clear and bright eyes as gentle as ripples of water ...

Lu Xiaofeng tried hard to control himself not to think about it; yet he himself knew that this memory would be forever etched at the bottom of his heart.

He walked as fast as he could, as far as he could. He ought to have reached the pathway leading back by now, yet when he stopped, he discovered that he was even deeper into the mountain.

And then he immediately discovered something dreadful: – he was lost.

A more frightening fact was that all around him the fog was getting thicker, a lot thicker than the Mansion of Spirits. It does not matter how good your vision is, you simply can't see past two zhang [approx. 6m/20ft] in all direction. No matter which way he took, there was a good possibility that he may be even farther away from the Mansion of Spirits.

But Lu Xiaofeng still wanted to try. He was not the kind of person who would simply sit down, waiting for the cloud to clear, or the fog to disperse.

After walking far way, he still could not find the road. In this unfamiliar forest in the mountain, the most frustrating thing was that in this thick fog, how much longer did he have to walk before he could find his way home?

When he started to feel hungry and tired, when he started to feel anxious, he suddenly smelled something, a breath of life.

Although the aroma was very weak, he could instantly tell that it was the aroma of roasted hare.

Way back when he was a boy, he had established himself as a capable hunter. Even after he grew up, his interest in hunting was still very strong.

Rabbits cannot roast themselves, so where the rabbits are roasted, there must be people around, and the only place with people in that vicinity was the Mansion of Spirits.

He swallowed his own saliva. Although he felt hungrier than ever, his spirit was boosted. After holding his breath for a moment, he took a very deep breath, and immediately decided that the aroma came from somewhere west of here.

His judgment was obviously correct, because after walking along a small path for a while, the aroma was growing thicker and thicker.

The terrain ahead seemed to be even more rugged, and the path seemed to be heading down. The aroma of roasted hare seemed to blend with some kind of rotten stink that only a swamp could produce.

Even if there were people around, this place was definitely not the Mansion of Spirits.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart sank again. What kind of people would live in this kind of place? He simply could not imagine it.

Right this moment, suddenly there was strange noise ahead. He quickened his pace, and soon saw strange shadow in the midst of thick fog.

He could see that it was in no way a man's shadow, but it did not look like any beast either; he could not even describe the shadow's shape.

One thing that he did know was that when he saw the shadow, there was unspeakable dread and nauseating feeling creeping up in his heart, something that made him nearly vomited.

The shadow ahead did not seem to be at peace, it seemed to be twisting and turning continuously. By the time Lu Xiaofeng braced himself and rushed forward, the shadow suddenly disappeared. It disappeared completely, as if it never existed.

Lu Xiaofeng could not help shivering. He stood unmoving, staring blankly for a long time. Suddenly he smelled a whiff of burning charcoal carried by the wind. This must be the place where the rabbit was roasted!

He believed his intuition was correct, yet all around him he did not see any trace of human.

If it were someone else, he would have left early on; perhaps he would have run away as fast as he could.

But Lu Xiaofeng never gave up.

First, he made a mental circle, surrounding the area about ten zhang [1 zhang is approx. 10ft/3m] with an invisible rope. And then he scoured the area just like someone unfolding a roll of rug.

The dirt and dead leaves on the ground was damp, typical of an area around a swamp. Only a piece of ground was unusually dry, it was obvious that the dead leaves covering it were just moved over.

He stooped down and pushed the leaves aside, just like a hunting dog he sniffed the dirt; he even picked up a bit of dirt and tasted it.

Sure enough, the dirt had a flavor of burnt charcoal, with a hint of hare fat. He dug the ground, and found some dried branches, several gnawed pieces of bones, and a Y-shaped piece of branch that was used as roasting fork. There was even a little bit of rabbit meat left on the fork, the cut on the skin was clean and tidy.

Only human's hands could make such a roasting fork, only human teeth could gnaw the bones and clean the meat on them, moreover, only human cook his meal.

This place must be inhabited.

Not only this person had very skillful hands, he did everything very carefully; if it was not Lu Xiaofeng, others might find it very difficult to find any sign that someone had roasted a rabbit over here.

Who was this person? Why did he come here? Was he also running away from someone else's hunt? What was that twisting and turning shadow he had just seen?

Lu Xiaofeng was completely at a loss. But precisely because he was at a loss that he got even more curious.

In his mind right now, whether he was able to find his way back or not has become a less important matter; because he was determined to find the answer to these questions.

The answer must be around here. Yet clearly there wasn't any clue around here.

Lu Xiaofeng sat down. First he cleaned up the dirt from the rabbit meat, and then tearing it piece by piece, he slowly chewed.

There was no salt, the meat was burnt, plus it had been buried in the dirt; naturally the rabbit meat was tasteless, practically it was inedible.

But he forced himself to finish it.

No matter what he wanted to do, he had to have strength, and hunger was his fatal weakness.

After having something in his stomach, indeed he felt a bit better. He lay down, thinking that he would rest on this pile of soft leaves for a moment before continuing searching around.

Naturally he did not know that as he lay down this time, he nearly could not stand up again, forever.

Like drifting clouds, the fog was floating between the leaves of the trees. As Lu Xiaofeng was lying down, he did feel that the mist was far away like floating clouds in the sky, and he felt that everything was floating farther and farther away from him.

His entire being felt like it suddenly sunk into a soft and sweet, yet bottomless hole. It was as if everything in the world had become distant, become beautiful, and even the most important thing has become insignificant, all the pain and suffering had gone away.

This kind of relaxed and sweet feeling was exactly what everybody was looking for, yet Lu Xiaofeng was feeling a kind of unspeakable dread.

He knew that he was not supposed to feel this way, that he should not feel this way, that his anxiety and burdens should not be put down like this. His greater fear was that when he tried to get up, he found that all muscles and joints in his body felt so relaxed without any strength left.

Just then, he saw the strange shadow again.

In the fog, the twisting shadow looked like a rag doll that have been twisted by a naughty child; it did not look like a human at all.

Because 'his' entire body was flexible, every part could be distorted.

Humans have bones, humans have joints. Humans can't be like that, 'he' was definitely not human!

Lu Xiaofeng opened his eyes wide, trying to focus his vision. When he looked clearly enough, he heard the shadow talked.

"You are Lu Xiaofeng?"

The voice was strange, incomprehensible and sounded slow-witted, yet it was definitely a human's voice.

Not only this shadow was a human, he was a human who knew Lu Xiaofeng!

Fortunately, by this time Lu Xiaofeng had no more shock or dread in his mind, otherwise he might be so scared that he went crazy.

Unexpectedly the shadow was laughing, a 'chi, chi' kind of laughter; he said, "I heard Lu Xiaofeng has never been poisoned, yet now you are being poisoned?"

Lu Xiaofeng has been wondering about that. Whenever there was a tiny bit of poison in his food and drink, no matter which kind, he could always detect it.

The shadow laughed again and said, "Let me tell you, this is cannabis leaf, I like to use it to roast my food. When I eat it I can feel happy like immortals, but when you ate it you became like a dead dog."

He went on to explain, "Just now when you smelled the aroma of roasted meat, you have already breathed the poison a little bit, that's the reason why by the time you ate the meat, you could not detect it."

"You intentionally lured me here?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The shadow shook his head, "I intentionally left that piece of meat in here, otherwise, even an entire horse, I could eat it all."

He seemed to enjoy of what he had just said very much.

-- Only people who have been alone for a long time would have the habit of mumbling to themselves like that. Only this kind of people would enjoy his own voice like that.

He laughed his 'chi, chi' laughter for half a day before continuing, "If you did not find that piece of meat, I would have let you go, unfortunately, you did find it."

"Unfortunately?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The shadow said, "Because I can't let anybody know that I am here."

Suddenly, using some kind of indescribable, bizarre technique he jumped over toward Lu Xiaofeng, and sealed several of his acupoints.

His hand looked like a rotten snake skin gloves, but his movement was

absolutely accurate and was very effective.

Compared to the rest of his body, this hand seemed easier to bear.

No one could describe his appearance. No one could, no one dared, but also no one could bear to describe.

Although Lu Xiaofeng's mind was completely blank and he was delirious, seeing this man, he still could not refrain from shuddering and wanting to vomit.

The shadow laughed coldly and said, "Now that you've seen me, you think that I am very ugly, don't you?"

Lu Xiaofeng could not deny.

The shadow said, "If you have been pushed down from a cliff hundreds of zhang high, and soaked down in the mud for dozens of days, you'd have become like this too."

His laughter was more sorrowful than crying, "Formerly, not only I was not as ugly as you are, I could be considered a handsome man."

Lu Xiaofeng did not pay attention to his last sentence; his question was, "You have been pushed down from a cliff hundreds of zhang high, and soaked down in the mud for dozens of days, yet you did not die?"

With a miserable laugh the shadow said, "I don't know either how I

survived, it was as if God was helping me, yet God has also deliberately trying to torment me.”

This man could live until now, it was indeed a miracle; yet this miracle was just brought about by some rotten leaves.

The rotting leaves on the swamp produced some kind of exotic fungus; it was as if this special fungus could miraculously heal human’s festering wound.

The shadow said, “I depended on things that had not been rotting in the mud to fill my stomach; after dozens of day I was finally able to crawl out. Afterwards I realized that the mud seems to be beneficial to my injury; hence every time my wound started to turn into festering boil, I dipped myself into the mud. Over the years, it had become a habit.”

Finally Lu Xiaofeng understood why this man’s body could easily twist and turn like a snake.

The shadow continued, “But this condition was really unbearable to me; fortunately later on I accidentally discovered that cannabis leaves can help me forget my many sufferings. That’s the reason I can still be alive until now.”

The amazing resilience power of life, the way all living things fit fantastically, beyond anything humanity are capable to imagine.

Lu Xiaofeng heaved a deep sigh; the shadow in front of him gradually return to its original shape. All along he willed himself to concentrate; it’s

a pity that although by now the effect of the drug has gradually disappeared, his acupoints were sealed.

Suddenly he asked, "You knew that I am Lu Xiaofeng; did you recognize me?"

"I did not," the shadow replied, "But I have seen you."

"When did you see me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"A moment ago," the shadow replied.

"You saw me a moment ago?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The shadow said, "You have discovered my secret, I should have killed you to close your mouth; it was precisely because I have seen you that you are still alive until now."

Lu Xiaofeng was even more confused. "Why?" he asked.

The shadow said, "Because all in all you are not a bad person; you did not seize the opportunity to bully Ah Xue."

His voice suddenly became emotional, "Ah Xue has always been a good child, I don't want her to be bullied."

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked. "What are you to her?" he asked.

The shadow was unwilling to answer this question; he asked instead, "Why did Ximen Chuixue want to kill you? What kind of enmity do you have against him?"

Lu Xiaofeng hesitated, but in the end he decided to tell the truth, "He saw me sleeping in the same bed with his wife."

The shadow did not say anything; he stared at Lu Xiaofeng for a long time. Suddenly he let out a strange laughter and said, "Now I understand why you are coming to Mansion of Spirits."

"I came to escape disaster," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"No you don't," the shadow said.

"Even you did not want to die," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Naturally I don't want to die either."

The shadow said, "You are not afraid to die; you came here just because you wanted to unearth the secret of this place."

His voice was brimming with confidence, "Even a woman like Ah Xue failed to tempt you, how could you steal Ximen Chuixue's wife?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "I just want to ask you one thing," he said.

"Go ahead," the shadow said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "If I were a spy, how could Old Sabre Honcho let me live till now? He is such a formidable character, you should know it better than I do."

The shadow suddenly shook, his body suddenly curled up into a ball, immediately his eyes were brimming with grief and indignation, with hatred and fear.

Lu Xiaofeng slowly said, "Of course you do, because the person who pushed you down from the high cliff was precisely him!"

The shadow was shaking even harder.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "But don't worry, I will never reveal this secret."

"Why?" the shadow could not help asking.

"Because I really like Ye Xue," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I will never harm her father."

The shadow cowered and took a step back; his voice was hoarse, "Who's her father?" he asked.

"You are," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

The shadow suddenly dropped down, lying on the ground; even his

breathing had stopped.

But he was not dead; after a long time he sighed and said, "You are right, I am. Everybody thought I was dead, even they, the two sisters, thought I was dead."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "At least you have to tell them that you are still alive."

The shadow sprang up and said, "You must never tell them; never!"

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The shadow said, "Because no matter what I can't let them see me like this. I would rather ..."

Suddenly he stopped. Pressing his ear to the ground, he listened for a long time, and then he said in a low voice, "You must never tell anyone that you have seen me, please, I beg you."

By the time he said the last three words, he had already disappeared. With these three words he was indeed pleading earnestly.

Then, after a long time Lu Xiaofeng finally heard footsteps, someone was coming, treading on dead leaves.

Lu Xiaofeng only hoped that it would be Ye Xue.

But the incoming person was not Ye Xue, it was Ye Ling.

When she saw Lu Xiaofeng, she was shocked as well, but soon she calmed down.

Apparently this little Miss was a lot more cool-headed than anyone gave her credit for; she was a lot more experienced. She asked, "Just now I heard people talking, whom did you talk to?"

"No one," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I was talking to myself."

Ye Ling laughed. She winked and laughed and said, "Since when do you like to talk to yourself?"

"When I found out that friends are not very reliable," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Then why did you lie down in here alone?" Ye Ling asked.

"Because I like to," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Ye Ling laughed again. With hands behind her back, she walked around Lu Xiaofeng, twice. Suddenly she said, "You sealed your own acupoints, it must be because you also like to do it."

Lu Xiaofeng could only laugh bitterly. He was forced to admit that this little Miss' eyesight was also a lot keener than people gave her credit for. But he was also confident that he could still deal with her.

For people like him, lying to a little girl like her was not too difficult to do.

"Most of the leaves and wild mushrooms around here are poisonous, I ate some by accident, hence I was forced to seal a couple of my own acupoints, so that the poison would not attack my heart."

He suddenly found out that lying was not too difficult to do.

Ye Ling stared at him; she seemed to believe him, yet she said nothing.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "Only after I sealed my acupoints did I realize a grave problem: I couldn't unseal it myself. Luckily you are here now; indeed I must thank the Heaven and thank the Earth."

Ye Ling was still staring at him without saying anything.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I know you can unseal the acupoints for me, you have always been a very resourceful person."

Ye Ling suddenly said, "You wait here, I'll be right back."

Finished speaking, she flew away without even looking back.

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbfounded.

Fortunately as soon as Ye Ling left, the shadow suddenly appeared.

Lu Xiaofeng was relieved. He said, "Whatever you want to do, I'll do it. I promise. Now can you let me go?"

The shadow's answer was very blunt, "Cannot."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because I really want to see how Ah Ling is going to deal with you," the shadow replied.

There was a hint of laughter in his voice, "That little girl has always been mischievous; the tricks she played, sometimes even caught me by surprise."

Lu Xiaofeng wanted to laugh, but he simply could not, because in truth he also could not guess how Ye Ling would deal with him. He only knew that this crafty girl was capable of doing anything.

He was going to talk it out with the shadow, but the shadow disappeared once more. And then he heard footsteps on the dead leaves again.

This time the footsteps sounded heavier, Ye Ling also arrived a lot quicker than the last time. In her hand she had some unknown herbs; evidently she has just picked it. As soon as she stopped and caught her breath, she said, "Eat it!"

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked, "You want me to eat this crap weeds?"

With a straight face Ye Ling said, "This is not weeds, this is a life-saving medicine, that I worked so hard to find for you."

She went on to explain, "Unsealing your acupoints is so easy, but after the acupoints are unsealed, if by any chance the poison attack your heart, won't I be harming you instead? Therefore, I must find you the antidote first."

"Right now the poison in my body seems to be dissipating," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"It doesn't seem like it," Ye Ling said, "We must completely eradicate the poison from your system; besides, this kind of medicinal herb is beneficial to your body anyway, eating a bit more won't do you any harm."

While her mouth was busy talking, Lu Xiaofeng's mouth could not speak at all, because it was being stuffed with herbs.

He suddenly found out that the saying 'good medicine tastes bitter' made a lot of sense. It doesn't matter if this herbs was very beneficial to him, he simply did not wish to try it the second time.

With so much difficulty he was finally able to swallow the grass into his stomach. Ye Ling was visibly relieved; she blinked and asked, "How are you feeling? Did it taste good?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Baa, baa ..."

"What is that?" Ye Ling asked.

"That's sheep," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I suddenly feel that I have turned into a sheep."

Ye Ling laughed; she said sweetly, "I love little sheep. Come, let me carry you."

Unexpectedly she really carried Lu Xiaofeng; her strength was indeed not small.

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked, "What are you holding me for? Why haven't you unseal my acupoints?"

"Right now the poison has not been completely eradicated," Ye Ling said, "This is not a good place to linger, I must carry you someplace else."

"Where are you carrying me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Naturally to a good place," Ye Ling replied, "A very, very good place."

Lu Xiaofeng could only smile wryly.

Being carried away by a young girl who was young enough to be his own daughter, naturally the feeling was not too pleasant.

But this young girl's breasts were obviously very mature, her body also smelled so good. Lu Xiaofeng had no choice but to close his eyes; he wanted to meditate like an old monk; but Ye Ling suddenly sang:

"Little girl carrying a clay doll,
Came to the garden to admire the flowers,
I told the doll to listen to me,
The doll calls me little mama."

Half of this song was sung by Lu Xiaofeng, she made up the other half, but it was very fitting. Listening to the song, it was only natural that Lu Xiaofeng did not know whether he should laugh or he should cry. And at that moment, he suddenly discover another matter that he did not know whether he should laugh or cry.

He suddenly felt something was not right. At first he still did not know what went wrong. And it would be better if he did not know, because as soon as he found out, he felt even worse.

-- He suddenly discovered that unexpectedly he had become a cat on a hot tin roof. [alright, alright, the original text does not have the word 'tin' ...] A male cat.

If he were really on a hot roof, it would be a bit better. But the fact was that he was in the embrace of a young woman, a soft and sweet-smelling young woman. And this young woman was clearly someone that he must not let his heart be moved by.

He repeatedly warned himself, "She is just a little kid, I must not think about this kind of things; I absolutely must not ..."

Too bad that there are certain things that even if you don't want to think about, you will find that you are fighting a losing battle. Just like 'it is going to rain, wifey wants to cheat on you'. Nothing you can do about it. [Translator's note: I am not sure about this, perhaps some Chinese saying.]

Lu Xiaofeng knew that a certain part of his body has changed, a change that a healthy man in the prime of his life is absolutely helpless to prevent.

His only hope was that Ye Ling would not notice.

He did not dare to look at Ye Ling, not even a single glance.

Yet obviously Ye Ling was looking at him. She suddenly said, "Why is your face red? Are you having a fever?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not have any choice but mumbling some obscure reply, something that even he himself did not know what he was talking about.

Luckily Ye Ling did not ask further; luckier still, he was basically unable to move at all.

If his acupoints were not sealed, what could he possibly do?

He did not even dare to think about it.

Ye Ling suddenly said, "Looks like the herbs is finally working."

Lu Xiaofeng could not help asking, "What kind of herb was that? Was it a life-saving [救命 – jiuming], or life-killing [要命 – yaoming, could also mean annoying, desperate, awful, terrible, etc.]?"

"Life-killing," Ye Ling replied.

She suddenly stopped, put down Lu Xiaofeng, and lay him down on a pile of soft leaves and grass.

When Lu Xiaofeng opened his eyes, he found out that they were in a cave. With arms akimbo, Ye Ling was standing in front of him, and grinning wickedly like a little demon.

"Don't you feel terrible [see above] right now?" she asked.

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Practically I feel damn desperately terrible."

Ye Ling said, "I know what kind of medicine can cure you."

"What medicine?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Me," Ye Ling replied, while pointing at her own nose, "Only I can cure

you."

Lu Xiaofeng stared at her.

She was not a little girl anymore; the parts of her body that were supposed to be big were already big.

Clenching his teeth, Lu Xiaofeng said bitterly, "You ask for it, don't blame me."

"I won't blame you," Ye Ling said, "What are you going to do?"

Nothing. Lu Xiaofeng could not do anything, because he could not even move.

-- A moment ago he felt so fortunate, but now it has become a misfortune.

He just felt that he was about to burst any time.

Ye Ling looked at him. She giggled and said, "Do you know that sometimes a time like this could make you desperate?"

Lu Xiaofeng knew.

He believed that right now no one else in the world could know it better than he did.

Worse yet, he had seen her legs. Nobody knew since when did this little demon's leg was suddenly exposed outside her clothes.

Her leg was curvaceous, slender, and firm.

Lu Xiaofeng's voice became a moan, "Why do you have to kill me?"

Ye Ling replied in tender voice, "I really want to help you. I really like you, too bad ..."

She ran a finger along Lu Xiaofeng's body, "I am also a virgin, no man has ever touched me."

It was precisely what her older sister has just said; she even imitated the tone of her voice.

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng understood. Ye Xue's secret little world was not as secret as she imagined it would be.

Suddenly Ye Ling let out a cold laugh and said, "To tell you the truth, I have seen everything that the two of you did over there, I have seen everything clearly."

"She is your [older] sister ..." Lu Xiaofeng said.

"She is not my sister!" Ye Ling said in a loud voice, "She is my natural enemy, everything that I liked, she always wanted to snatch it away from

me.”

“I ...” Lu Xiaofeng started, but Ye Ling cut him off, “She clearly knew I saw you first, yet she still wanted to snatch you. But this time I will not let her, you are mine, I want to marry you.”

Suddenly she broke into laughter, a very sweet, and tender laughter, “Actually, if you say it is you who wanted to marry me, I am fine with it. Either way, I agree.”

Things have come to this, what else could Lu Xiaofeng say?

The cave was dark and quiet, twilight drew near.

After a moment of quietness, Ye Ling suddenly broke into crying. But it was not clear whether she cried of excessive grief, or because she had suffered enough injustice.

“You bullied me; how could you bully me like that? You ruined my life forever.”

Actually, who bullied who? Who harmed who?

Lu Xiaofeng only smiled wryly; he did not dare to laugh. No matter what, she was a little girl; not only that, she was a little girl who has never let a man touch her.

If a man had done something to a little girl like he had just done to her,

what else could the man say?

"That thing that you promised just now, do you already have regret?"

"No, I don't."

"You really don't have regret?"

"Really."

She laughed. And she laughed as if she was really a little girl.

"Let's go, we are going home." She grabbed his hand, "From now on, you are a married man. As long as you don't go looking for other women, I will definitely wait on you like I am waiting upon the Emperor."

The sun set in the west, twilight covered the mountain.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt very tired. In all his life, he has never felt this tired.

It was not because of that life-killing grass, and it was not because of that 'terrible thing' either. This kind of tiredness seemed to stem from his own mind.

When in his heart a man is prepared to abandon everything, he would feel this kind of tiredness.

-- Perhaps I really should be a 'married man'.

Under this kind of beautiful sunset, looking at Ye Ling's child-like smile on her face, in his heart he indeed had a thought.

-- No matter what she did, she did it all because she liked me.

Her smile was even sweeter. He could not help pulling her hand.

Right this moment they heard the bell tolling in the distance, it seemed like Mansion of Spirits was going to have another banquet tonight.

Could it be that the Old Sabre Honcho has already prepared a wedding feast for them?

Chapter 10 – Taking chances in scaling the peak of the pavilion

Translated by Foxs

The banquet had not started yet, because everybody was still waiting for someone, someone who could not be absent.

Lu Xiaofeng walked in quietly, Ye Ling followed behind him with a smile on her face; her smile was very cheerful, but Lu Xiaofeng was wearing a sour look on his face. He was hoping that nobody would notice him, but obviously everybody noticed him, all eyes were on him, their expression looked a bit strange.

Old Sabre Honcho stared at him and said, "You are late."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I was lost, I ..."

Basically Old Sabre Honcho did not hear whatever he said, because he continued, "But I know that you would come as soon as you heard the bell; hence everybody is waiting for you, and we have been waiting for a long time."

Lu Xiaofeng forced a laugh and said, "Actually, you need not wait for me."

"But today we simply must wait," Old Sabre Honcho said.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because today is a celebration day," Old Sabre Honcho said.

"Whose celebration?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Yours," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbfounded. He really did not know how Old Sabre Honcho could find out about this matter. Could it be that Old Sabre Honcho sent Ye Ling to do this?

Ye Ling did not say anything, he did not turn to look at her either; even more, he did not dare to look at Ye Xue, who was sitting right next to Old Sabre Honcho.

All along Ye Xue was looking down, unexpectedly she did not look at Lu Xiaofeng either.

Old Sabre Honcho said, "This place has always seen funerals, but after you came here, at long last you have given us a reason to celebrate."

His tone gradually relaxed as he continued, "Everybody here is also very much in favor of this matter. You and Ah Xue are indeed a very good pair."

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked. "Ah Xue?"

Old Sabre Honcho nodded. "I have asked her," he said, "She obeys me completely, and I am sure you would not object."

Lu Xiaofeng was stunned again.

Ye Ling, who sat behind him, suddenly cried out, "I object!"

Everybody's countenance changed dramatically. Nobody has ever imagined that someone actually dared to go against the Old Sabre Honcho.

Ye Xue lifted up her head; she looked at her younger sister in shock.

Ye Ling stood up and said loudly, "I strongly object, even if I have to die I will object!"

Old Sabre Honcho angrily said, "In that case you'd better die quickly!"

Ye Ling was unfazed. "If I die, Lu Xiaofeng will die with me."

"Says who?" Old Sabre Honcho said sternly.

"I don't care who said that," Ye Ling replied, "Because he and I are already husband and wife who live together and die together."

This last sentence shocked everybody even more. Ye Xue's face was suddenly drained of any color. "You married him?" she asked.

Ye Ling raised her head high and said with a cold laugh, "That's right, I have married him, I have given everything to him. This time I am one step ahead of you. He does not want you, he wants me."

Ye Xue's entire body shook. "You ... you lie!" she said.

Ye Ling pulled Lu Xiaofeng's arm. "Why don't you tell her?" she said, "Everything I said is the truth."

Each word she said was like a needle. Lu Xiaofeng did not need to speak up, everybody knew that she was not lying.

Ye Xue suddenly stood up, threw the table in front of her, and stormed out without ever looking back.

Ye Ling's confidence soared; pulling Lu Xiaofeng's arm, she went straight toward Old Sabre Honcho and said, "Ah Xue is your goddaughter, and I am too; why aren't you willing to support me?"

Old Sabre Honcho stared at her; from underneath the bamboo rain hat, his eyes seemed to shoot arrows. He said coldly, "Have the two of you really made an oath to become man and wife for the rest of your life?"

"Of course we have," Ye Ling replied.

"Very well," Old Sabre Honcho said, "I will support you. After three months, I will personally officiate your wedding."

"Why do we have to wait for three months?" Ye Ling asked.

Old Sabre Honcho's voice was stern, "Because I said so. Do you dare not

to obey my words?"

Ye Ling did not dare.

Old Sabre Honcho said, "In these three months, I forbid you to see each other. After three months, if you have not changed your mind, I will let you get married."

Without giving Ye Ling any opportunity to talk, he ordered Liu Qingqing, "These three months, I am handing Lu Xiaofeng to you!"

Ye Ling bit her lip. Suddenly she stomped her foot and stormed out; but as she reached the door, she looked back and gave Lu Xiaofeng a venomous gaze, "You listen to me, if you ever dare to touch another woman, I will steal a hundred men for you to see, I want you to wear a hundred green hats." [Wearing green hat: a man whose spouse cheated on him, a cuckold.]

The banquet in the main hall was over, the people dispersed. Liu Qingqing had her small kitchen staff to prepare several kinds of dishes.

The dishes were exquisite, the wine was of top-quality; she was a woman of a very good taste. And she seemed to understand men very well.

Lu Xiaofeng did not talk, she simply sat quietly by his side, keeping him company. Whenever Lu Xiaofeng's cup was empty, she immediately poured more wine.

The dishes were not touched, but the wine was nearly gone.

Finally Lu Xiaofeng looked up and fixed his gaze on her. Suddenly he said, "Why don't you yell at me?"

Liu Qingqing said, "Why would I want to yell at you?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Because I am a jerk [orig. hun dan, muddled-egg], because I ..."

Liu Qingqing did not let him continue; she said in tender voice, "You don't need to feel sorry for me. I am older than you are, I have never had any ambition to marry you, I just want to be your friend."

She smiled. A very coquettish smile. "If you agree," she added, "I could be your mistress."

Lu Xiaofeng could only let out a wry smile.

If she really yelled at him, perhaps he would feel a bit better. Even if she slapped him several times, he would not care.

Liu Qingqing continued, "But I know you will never take such a risk."

"Take what risk?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"The risk of wearing green hat," Liu Qingqing said. "That little demon is

capable of doing whatever she dares to say."

She chuckled again and said, "Actually, she cannot be considered little demon anymore, she is already seventeen. When I was seventeen, I was already married."

Lu Xiaofeng started to drink again.

Liu Qingqing watched as he drank several more bowls. Suddenly she asked, "Are you thinking about Ah Xue right now?"

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head right away.

Liu Qingqing said, "You are not thinking about her, but I am a bit concerned about her. She has always been stubborn, someone who is most concerned about her dignity, but today she lost such a big face in front of everybody, I am afraid ..."

Lu Xiaofeng could not help asking, "What are you afraid of?"

Liu Qingqing started to speak, but she stopped herself. Actually, she did not need to speak, because what she was about to say, no one would not not understand it.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly laughed coldly and said, "If you are afraid that she was going to kill herself, you are wrong."

"Oh?" Liu Qingqing said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "She is definitely not a woman who is unable to take a lighter view, plus she and I don't have that kind of relationship."

Liu Qingqing did not argue, she could see that Lu Xiaofeng had a bit of drunkenness and a bit of remorse in him.

But what did he regret? Was it what he did to Ximen Chuixue? Or was it about Ye Xue?

Anybody who rejected that kind of girl would inevitably feel some kind of regret.

Perhaps he regretted marrying Ye Ling. In reality, they could not be considered a perfect couple.

Liu Qingqing sighed inwardly as she poured another cup of wine for him. The night was deep, being sober might be too painful instead, he might as well be drunk.

Therefore, she poured another cup for herself. Suddenly from the outside someone said, "Leave a cup for me."

The visitor was, unexpectedly, Cousin. Liu Qingqing coldly said, "Since when did you start to think that I'll invite you for a drink?"

Cousin's expression was very peculiar; he was short of breath. Forcing a laugh, he said, "Originally, I did not come here to drink wine."

"What did you come here for?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"I am here to deliver news," Cousin replied.

"And now you want to drink?" Liu Qingqing asked.

Cousin sighed and said, "Because the news is actually very bad."

Bad news always makes people wanted to drink. The person who hears it wants to drink, the person who delivers it wants to drink even more.

Liu Qingqing immediately handed over the cup in her hand. As soon as he finished drinking, she asked, "What news?"

Cousin said, "Ye Xue has entered Skyway Pavilion."

Instantly Liu Qingqing's expression became very peculiar as well.

A long time afterwards, she slowly turned around to face Lu Xiaofeng, and slowly said, "Looks like you are the one who is wrong, not me."

"What kind of place is this Skyway Pavilion?"

"It's a log cabin, located on the Skyway Cliff. Skyway Cliff is that towering cliff at the back of the mountain."

"I don't think I've seen that cliff."

"Of course you haven't, this log cabin is temporarily closed."

"What's inside?"

"Nothing, only a coffin with a dead person inside."

In the Mansion of Spirits, there was only one dead person.

"That closed log cabin is used to store Ye Guhong's coffin."

"Not to store it, to cremate it."

Lu Xiaofeng's heart sank.

Cousin said, "Ah Xue went there, obviously she wants to be buried together with her [older] brother, to be cremated together!"

A gloomy night, a dark cliff. In the dark night, that lone log cabin looked like a deathly grey object.

Three men were standing under the platform-like rock: Hai Qikuo, Housekeeper, and Old Sabre Honcho.

In the strong mountain breeze, the three people's expression was as dark as the night.

Dry branches have already been piled up around the log cabin.

Lu Xiaofeng let Cousin and Liu Qingqing went forward to join them, while he halted his steps quite some distance away.

His heart was a mess; he needed to calm down first.

Liu Qingqing already asked, "How long has she been there?"

"Too long," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

"Who first saw her there?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"Nobody," Old Sabre Honcho replied, "She told me to come here. She had the night guard on duty come to me, saying that she has last words she wanted to tell me."

"And what did she say?" Liu Qingqing asked.

Old Sabre Honcho clenched his fists. "She wanted me to find the real killer, and wanted me to avenge his brother!" he said.

"That was her last words?" Liu Qingqing asked.

Old Sabre Honcho nodded. His countenance grew heavier, "She is ready to die," he said grimly.

"Why don't you go talk to her?" Liu Qingqing asked.

Old Sabre Honcho replied, "She said that as soon as I come, she would immediately die in front of me."

Liu Qingqing no longer asked questions; she certainly knew that Ye Xue was someone who meant what she says, and she has never been known as someone who easily changed her mind for whatever reason.

The wind grew colder. Vaguely they seemed to hear the sound of weeping.

Liu Qingqing could not help shivering. She said, "Are we going to watch her die just like that?"

Lowering his voice, Old Sabre Honcho said, "I was just waiting for you two, perhaps you could save her."

"You want us to sneak up there?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"The two of you have the highest qinggong," Old Sabre Honcho said, "When the wind is strongest, go up there, Ah Xue will never find out."

"And then what?" Liu Qingqing asked.

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Cousin go around to the back first, break through the wall and charge inside, I will be waiting outside the front

door. When she sees Cousin, even if she won't fight, she will definitely argue for a bit, you then rush in and hold her."

Liu Qingqing hesitated, "That doesn't sound like a good plan," she mumbled.

Old Sabre Honcho coldly said, "Can you think of a better way?"

Liu Qingqing could not, hence she went up.

Her qinggong was indeed not bad, Cousin was not necessarily inferior to her either. In fact, the two of them could be considered top-notch experts. Five, six zhang-high cliff, they were able to climb easily.

The log cabin was still dark and deathly quiet; Ye Xue indeed did not detect their action.

Liu Qingqing quietly made a hand signal, Cousin immediately winded around to the back, and then there was a loud 'bang!'

It was a wooden structure made of flammable material, to break into it was not difficult at all.

But that loud 'bang' was immediately followed by a miserable scream. In this cold midnight wind, the scream sounded extremely mournful.

There seemed to be a faint sword flash in the dark as well, and then somebody fell down from the cliff, and landed heavily on the ground; half

of his body was drenched with blood. It was none other than Cousin.

And then they heard Ye Xue's voice carried by the wind, "Widow Hua, if you are not leaving, I will have you accompany me in death." Her voice was shrill and impatient.

"Tell Old Sabre Honcho, if he does not want more people getting hurt, it would be best if he does not send anybody up anymore. In any case, I will not walk out of here alive."

There was no need for Liu Qingqing to pass on the message, everybody has heard what she said; they heard every word clearly.

With both hands clenched into fists, Old Sabre Honcho's gaze looked as sharp as blade, as he stared at Cousin from beneath the bamboo rain hat and said in stern voice, "You are [Taoist] Priest Gu of Mount Ba's disciple, you have always thought that your martial art skill is not bad, why are you this useless?"

Cousin's hand was pressing onto the wound on his shoulder, blood was still pouring from his fingers, while the cold sweats on his forehead were as big as soya beans. This sword wound was undoubtedly very serious.

It took a long time before he was finally able to speak, "She seemed to be ready for me. As soon as I broke in, her sword was waiting for me right there."

Old Sabre Honcho suddenly threw his head back and heaved a deep sigh, "I have told you that she is better than all of you. Wandering Soul is

dead, General is seriously hurt, I lost two experts already. If I also lose her ...” He stomped his foot, the rock underneath his foot immediately shattered into small pieces.

Right this moment, suddenly a voice coming from the darkness, “Maybe I still have a way to save her.”

The newcomer was Dugu Mei.

“You have a way?” Old Sabre Honcho asked, “What way?”

Dugu Mei chuckled and said, “Too bad I don’t recognize my own family [see Junny’s note in Chapter 2]; naturally I won’t try to save anybody with no cause, no reason.”

His laughter was so despicable, so crafty.

Old Sabre Honcho stared at him for a very long time before asking, “What’s your condition?”

“My condition is very simple,” Dugu Mei replied, “I want a wife.”

“Whom do you want?” Old Sabre Honcho asked.

Dugu Mei said, “The Ye sisters, Widow Hua, I don’t care.”

“As long as you promise that it will be effective,” Old Sabre Honcho said.

"And if it is effective, I agree," Old Sabre Honcho said.

Dugu Mei laughed again. "My method is very simple," he said, "Tie Lu Xiaofeng up and bring him up there. I can testify that he is the real killer who murdered Ye Guhong, because I was there at that time. When Miss Ye hears me, she would definitely rush forward to avenge her brother. After she personally kills Lu Xiaofeng, naturally she won't think about killing herself."

Old Sabre Honcho was listening quietly. He suddenly asked, "Wasn't it you who brought Lu Xiaofeng here?"

Dugu Mei laughed. "That was one of the times when occasionally I did not guard against finding my conscience; nothing more. The number of times I have conscience is really not many."

Old Sabre Honcho was deep in thought for a long time. Finally he nodded slowly and said, "Your method indeed sounds not so bad."

He had just finished talking when he suddenly made his move; a light slap sent Dugu Mei splaying on the ground like a pile of mud.

Dugu Mei shouted, "Since my method is not so bad, why did you hit me?"

Old Sabre Honcho coldly said, "The method is not bad, the person is."

The second time he made his move, Dugu Mei was unable to shout anymore. His hand was not only too fast, it was not too heavy, but was absolutely accurate and effective.

Lu Xiaofeng was still standing on a distance, Old Sabre Honcho suddenly came over and patted his shoulder, "Come with me!" he said.

The depression behind the mountain was even darker, Old Sabre Honcho took Lu Xiaofeng to the darkest part before stopping and turning around to face him. He said slowly, "Dugu Mei's method is indeed very effective, why didn't I use it?"

"Because you knew I am not the real killer," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Wrong," Old Sabre Honcho said.

"Because you need me as well?" Lu Xiaofeng guessed.

"Correct," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

They both knew that they need not lie in front of the other, because they both were men who would not be easily deceived by others. This mutual understanding has elevated the relationship between them to almost close friendship.

"I am already old," Old Sabre Honcho began, "I know when an opportunity is lost, it will never come back; therefore ..."

Lu Xiaofeng completed the sentence for him, "Therefore you need me, because your opportunity will come very soon!"

Old Sabre Honcho looked straight at him; he slowly said, "I also need Ye Xue. Because the thing I am about to do is a big thing, and all of you are parts of my plan that I cannot afford to lose."

"You want me to save her?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Old Sabre Honcho nodded slowly and said, "If there is one person in the world who can keep her alive, that person would be you."

"Very well," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I'll go. But I also have one condition."

"Speak," Old Sabre Honcho said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I want you to give me twenty-four sichen [1 sichen equals to 2 hours]. During this period, no matter what I do, you must not interfere."

Old Sabre Honcho said, "I know that you always like to do things your own way."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Starting now, I don't want anybody to see where I am or where I am going. As long as you promise, after two days, I will definitely bring her back to see you."

"Alive?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

"I guarantee," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Old Sabre Honcho did not even blink, "I promise."

Everybody else has left, the sky above the cliff was eerily dark, the death-grey wooden cabin stood alone on the cliff like a lonely ghost.

Facing the wind, Lu Xiaofeng went over to the peak. The mountain breeze was moist and cold. Why was this ghost place always foggy?

Before he got too close to the log cabin, Ye Xue's moist and cold voice has already greeted him from the inside, "Who's there?"

"You should know who I am," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I can't see you, but I am sure you can see me."

After a very long silence, the answer was only one word, "Get lost!" [OK, two words, but the Chinese is only one, 滚 – lit. roll.]

"You don't want to see me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The answer was still one word, "Get lost!"

"If you don't want to see me, why all along you were waiting for me?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Another silence in the log cabin.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "You knew that sooner or later I would come here, that's the reason you are not dead yet."

He spoke very slowly, yet he walked very fast. Very soon he had already reached the door of the log cabin. "Hence I am going to push the door open and come in. I guarantee that this time there is no second person around." And then he pushed the door open.

Inside the log cabin, it was even darker and gloomier; but he could see a pair of shining eyes, the eyes carried some kind of indescribable emotion. Was it sorrow? Was it heartache? Or was it hatred?

Lu Xiaofeng stopped some distance away, "Don't you have anything to say to me?" he asked.

The weeping has long stopped, but the eyes were still wet.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Actually, even if you don't tell me, I know. You did all these things, it was not entirely because of me. It's just that you have never had something that you wanted taken away from you before."

Another cold ray flashed in the dark, just like the flash of a sword blade.

Was she trying to kill Lu Xiaofeng? Or was she trying to die in Lu Xiaofeng's presence?

The palm of Lu Xiaofeng's hands was already wet with cold sweats. This was the most critical juncture. If he committed the smallest error, at least one of them would definitely die in here.

He must not do one wrong thing, and he must not say one wrong word.

Ye Xue's voice suddenly echoed in the dark, "I am doing this, because there is no one in the world worth living."

"There is one," Lu Xiaofeng said, "At least there is one."

Naturally Ye Xue could not help asking, "Who?"

"Your father," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

He did not let Ye Xue open her mouth; he continued quickly, "Your father is not dead, I saw him last night."

Ye Xue suddenly laughed coldly, "Give me one good reason why I should believe your nonsense," she said.

"This is not nonsense," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I can take you to see him right now."

Ye Xue was hesitant, "You really can find him?" she asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "If within twelve sichen we can't find him, I'll take you

back here and let you die in peace and quiet."

Finally Ye Xue was convinced, "Very well," she said, "I believe you this time."

Lu Xiaofeng let out a relieved breath. "You won't regret it," he said.

Suddenly, there was a cold flash, the sword's blade was already pressed on Lu Xiaofeng's eyelashes, Ye Xue's voice was even colder than the sword's blade, "This time you deceive me again, we will die together!"

Dark valley, secluded and secret forest, but to Lu Xiaofeng, the place was not unfamiliar. Just like the woman by his side; although sometimes she was terrifying, other times Lu Xiaofeng could not deny the irresistible attraction he felt toward her.

This time he did not get lost. When he returned from this place, he was already prepared that he would be back here.

Ye Xue walked beside him silently, her face was still pale, her eyes cold; apparently she was determined to keep her distance from him.

But in such a deep and dark secret forest on the mountain, anything could change.

They have traveled for a very long time, the breeze was beginning to bring the smell of swamp in it. Lu Xiaofeng suddenly came to a halt; turning to face her, he said, "I saw him around here yesterday."

"Where is he now?" Ye Xue asked.

"I don't know," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Ye Xue's hands tightened.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "All I know is that he is in the swamp ahead, but we have to wait until dawn to look for him."

He sat down and said, "Let's wait here."

Ye Xue looked at him with cold eyes, she said in cold voice, "I told you, if you lie to me again this time ..."

Lu Xiaofeng cut her off, "I have never lied to you. Perhaps it was precisely because I never lied to you that you hate me."

Ye Xue looked away from him, her cold and beautiful eyes suddenly showed weariness.

She was indeed very tired, physically and mentally, yet she adamantly refused to sit down, she forced herself to stay awake.

But Lu Xiaofeng lay down on the soft leaves and closed his eyes.

After he closed his eyes, Ye Xue turned her gaze toward him. Quite

some time later, her lips began to tremble, and then her entire body shook, as if she suddenly remembered something dreadful.

She bit her lip, hard, and struggled to control herself, but this place was really too quiet, the kind of quietness that can drive people crazy, and the thing that she remembered happened to be something that no woman can endure.

Suddenly she rushed toward Lu Xiaofeng and kicked him on the ribs, while hissing, "I hate you, I hate you."

Lu Xiaofeng opened his eyes in shock.

Gasping for breath, Ye Xue said, "You must be here with my sister last night, and today you brought me here. You ... you ..."

Her voice cracked, her eyes were fiery with madness, all of a sudden she pounced to clutch Lu Xiaofeng's throat.

Lu Xiaofeng caught her hand. She pressed down hard, he had to resist even harder. The two of them rolled around on the soft leaves, fighting each other. Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng found himself on top of her.

Her breathing was intense, but her body was softer than the dead leaves; she had exhausted all her strength.

Then suddenly she quieted down. She had given up all her will to struggle and to resist. When she opened her eyes to look at Lu Xiaofeng, her eyes were full of tears.

The heaven and the earth were so quiet, so dark; the distance between them was so close. Lu Xiaofeng's heart suddenly softened like the fruit inside a honey candy. In this instant, all the pain, suffering and hatred were forgotten.

The tears streamed down her pale cheeks, he really wanted to suck the tear dry with his lips.

Just then, a cold breeze was blowing from the swamp, carrying with it the sound of singing. A sad song; sad enough to evoke all the suffering and hatred in people's heart.

Ye Xue held her breath, "Is it him?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed inwardly, "Looks like it," he said.

Ye Xue bit her lip again, "Maybe he knew that we are here," she said, "Maybe he is calling us."

Lu Xiaofeng stood up quietly; he pulled Ye Xue's hand along, just like pulling someone who was nearly drowning from the water.

Only this time he felt that the one was nearly drowning was not Ye Xue, but he himself.

Other than mud, what else is there in a swamp? Rotting leaves, poisonous weeds, crumbling rocks, countless insects and snakes, which

names he did not even know, blood sucking mosquitoes and leeches.

In this nothing-is-too-bizarre swamp, you may even be able to find hundreds of kinds of bizarre things, and I can guarantee that not a single one is not foul.

But in the dark, this foul swamp has suddenly become some kind of indescribable beauty; other than the stench that even the dark was unable to conceal, it exuded beauty that it almost felt like a mystical and tranquil lake.

The sad song had stopped, Lu Xiaofeng did not continue moving forward either, he had no choice but to stop his steps; because just now one of his feet had already stepped onto the mud, he had narrowly escaped being sucked into the swamp.

Just like sin, the swamp seemed to have a demonic, depraved attraction; as soon as you step into it, you will sink to the bottom.

Ye Xue's face became even paler, "Are you saying that all these years he had been hiding in here?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded.

"How could he survive in this place?" Ye Xue asked.

"Because he did not want to die," Lu Xiaofeng replied. There was sadness in his voice, "When one really wants to survive, any pain and suffering, no matter how big, will be endurable."

It was a very simple, yet very complex and profound truth. Only people who have endured bitter pain and suffering can understand it.

There was a sigh in the dark, "You are right, but you have done wrong; you shouldn't have brought anybody else here."

The rasping and bitter voice did not sound unfamiliar. Ye Xue's hands felt ice-cold.

Lu Xiaofeng held her hand tight; he said, "This is not somebody else, this is your daughter."

Seeing no one and hearing no response, he faced the dark swamp and continued in a loud voice, "Even if you won't let her see you, at least you ought to see her, she has already grown up."

The voice suddenly cut him off, "Isn't she still like before, loves to hide alone in a dark room, so that others cannot find her?"

It was her secret; she was born with a pair of eyes that can see in the dark. She loved to hide in the dark, because she knew that others could not see her, yet she could see others.

Those who knew this secret were indeed not many; suddenly her body tensed.

Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Have you heard clearly who he is?"

Ye Xue nodded. Suddenly she shouted, "If you won't let me see you, I'll die in here."

Another bout of silence.

At last a shadow emerged from the dark; unexpectedly it was a strange looking houseboat. Not only it could float on the swamp, it could also move around.

"You really have to see me?"

"I must," Ye Xue's answer was firm.

"Lu Xiaofeng, you shouldn't have brought her here, you really shouldn't."

The shadow sighed. No one could understand his daughter's pride and obstinate character better than he.

"I may let you see me one time, but you will regret it, because I am not what I used to be ..."

Ye Xue loudly said, "I don't care what you have become, you are still my Dad; in my heart, you won't change forever, you will always be the most handsome man in the world, the man who always treat me the best."

The floating houseboat was getting closer. When it was only two zhang

away, Ye Xue leaped over.

Lu Xiaofeng did not stop her, he could tell that there must be a deep emotional ties between them in the past. He suddenly thought about his own parents, he thought about his loneliness being without any family in the world.

A scream interrupted his train of thought.

The scream came from the houseboat, it was Ye Xue's voice; while the houseboat floated away, gradually disappearing in the dark.

Lu Xiaofeng's voice cracked, "You must not take her away!"

The shadow laughed, "Since she is my daughter, why can't I take her away?" The laughter was full of mocking and malice intention.

Lu Xiaofeng's entire body turned cold; he suddenly discovered something terrible has happened, "You are not her father!"

The shadow talked in slow, drawn voice, almost like chanting, "Wei River in the east, Jade Forest facing the wind ..."

"I know who you are," Lu Xiaofeng said, "You are Jade Forest Swordsman, Ye Lingfeng, but you are not her father."

The shadow laughed heartily, "It doesn't matter whatever I am to her, I am taking her away. Go back and tell Old Sabre Honcho, if he wants her

back, tell him to come to me personally."

The laughter gradually diminished, the houseboat also disappeared in the dark. Once again the mysterious swamp regained its darkness and tranquility.

Like a wooden statue Lu Xiaofeng stood in the dark. After a long, long time, he heaved a deep sigh and said, "I don't need to go back and tell you, because everything he said, you ought to be able to hear each word very clearly."

He was not talking to himself, because it was only after the houseboat has gone far away did he find out that Old Sabre Honcho was already behind him.

He did not need to turn back to know that.

Old Sabre Honcho has indeed arrived; he also heaved a deep sigh and said, "Every word he said, I indeed heard everything, but I always kept quite a bit of distance from you, I did not want to interfere with your action."

"I know you are a man of his word," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"What else do you know?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly turned around; he stared at him and said, "Ah Xue is not Ye Lingfeng's daughter; she is yours."

Old Sabre Honcho did not deny, but he did not confirm either.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "It was because Ye Lingfeng also knew this that you killed him."

Old Sabre Honcho laughed. But his laugh was difficult to understand. "I never thought that he didn't die."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Although he is alive, it is more painful than death; all along he has to clench his teeth to endure."

"Because he wants revenge," Old Sabre Honcho said.

"But he does not dare to come to you," Lu Xiaofeng said, "This is the only way you would look for him. He is more familiar to this area than you are, plus he has Ah Xue as a hostage, his chance is far better than yours."

Old Sabre Honcho coldly said, "I thought that you'd never fallen into his trap, unexpectedly in the end he could still exploit you."

"Fortunately my time limit has not expired," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Do you have confidence that you would be able to get her back before the time is up?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

"I don't," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "But I must go."

"How are you going to do that?" Old Sabre Honcho asked, "Are you going to dig into the mud like a loach?"

"I can make a raft," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Old Sabre Honcho hesitated. "Can your raft take two people?" he asked.

"Only two people working together can make a raft that can take two people," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Old Sabre Honcho laughed, "Looks like this man never wants to suffer any loss."

There was a forest by the swamp, with the two of them working together, in short period of time they were able to cut down seventeen, eighteen tree trunks – not with saber, just by hands.

Old Sabre Honcho said, "You go get rid of the branches and leaves, I'll go to find rope."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed wryly and said, "Doing business with someone like you, even if I don't want to suffer loss, I can't."

Although he was fully aware that his job was comparatively harder, he knew that he had no choice; because he simply did not know where to go to find rope.

Actually, Old Sabre Honcho was not trying to find ropes either. Lu Xiaofeng had just stooped down, the edge of Old Sabre Honcho's palm struck the back of his neck, and he fell down just like a tree.

The sky was overcast and dark, it was still foggy too.

When Lu Xiaofeng woke up, he found out that he was lying on Liu Qingqing's bed.

There was nobody else in the room. On the small bedside table, he saw a pot of wine, with a small wine cup next to it. Underneath the cup there was a note saying, "My hand slipped and accidentally hurt your respected neck. For the time being, here's some wine to alleviate your shock. When you wake up, there is no harm in enjoying a bit of drink, around noon tomorrow we'll meet again."

It was not until he finished reading the note that Lu Xiaofeng found the pain on his neck, that it was very difficult for him to even turning his head.

Naturally he knew that Old Sabre Honcho's hand did not slip and accidentally injuring him. But why did Old Sabre Honcho plot against him? Why did he prevent him from rescuing Ye Xue? What kind of skeleton did he hide in his closet?

Lu Xiaofeng did not understand, therefore, he might as well not think about it. Picking up the wine pot, he poured the wine directly into his mouth.

When half a bottle had entered his belly, suddenly there was a dog barking outside. At first it was only one dog, but very soon it became seven, eight dogs: big dogs, small dogs, male dogs, female dogs, everything. The barking was extremely noisy.

How could there be that many dogs in this secluded and secret valley?

Lu Xiaofeng could not resist going out to look. As soon as he pushed the door open, he could not help but was stunned.

There was not a single dog outside, there was only one person. A thin and withered man in black clothes, his face sickly yellow like wax, but his eyes were brilliantly bright.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. With a wry smile he said, "What are you? A man, or a dog?"

"I am neither a person nor a dog," Canine Master[1] replied.

"So, what 'thing' are you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I am not a 'thing' either," Canine Master replied, "Therefore, I am coming to you."

"What for?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"If you promise me one thing, I'll give you two news," Canine Master said.

"Is it good news, or bad news?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Canine Master laughed; he said, "Coming out from my mouth, how can there be good news?"

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed. Suddenly, as fast as lightning, he made his move; his two fingers pinched Canine Master's nose.

The two most valuable fingers in Wulin, the most famous unique skill in Jianghu. Canine Master was practically helpless to evade. Even if he could plainly see that these two fingers were about to pinch his nose, he would still be helpless to evade.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled and said, "I hear that dogs' nose is the sharpest, it must be difficult for a dog to pass his days without a nose."

Canine Master's yellowish face turned deep red; he couldn't even breathe.

Lu Xiaofeng let go of his hand and said, "Let's hear your news first."

Canine Master took a deep breath and said, "What news?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed again. Suddenly, as fast as lightning, his two fingers pinched Canine Master's nose again.

Canine Master still could not evade it.

Lu Xiaofeng let go of his hand again, and then smiled and said, "What do you think the news is?"

This time Canine Master could only tell the truth, because he understood one thing – as soon as Lu Xiaofeng made his move, he could easily pinch his nose, just as easy as an old beggar caught lice.

"General is dying, Little Leaf disappeared."

Those were the news coming out of his mouth, the news were indeed not good news.

"Nobody knew where Little Leaf went?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

With a wry laugh Canine Master said, "Not even a dog knew; much less a human?"

"What about the General?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"General is just waiting to die," Canine Master replied.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I know my own strength when I made my move, I did not wish for him to die at all."

"Other than you," Canine Master said, "There are other people in here."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "If somebody else killed him, the debt would be put on my head."

"Hence you should understand my good intention," Canine Master said, "General has always been good friends with Old Sabre Honcho."

"Hence I ought to agree to your condition," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Canine Master said, "I just want you to take me along when you go."

"That's it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"To you, it's a small thing, to me, it's a big thing," Canine Master said.

"Alright," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I promise."

Canine Master suddenly kneeled down and knocked his head heavily on the ground. Looking up, he let out a relieved sigh and said, "Too bad I don't have a tail, otherwise I will wag my tail at least three times whenever I see you."

"Where is General?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"General is naturally at the General's Mansion," Canine Master replied.

There was a forest outside the General's Mansion, Canine Master has left, but there was someone panting like a dog in the forest.

To be able to pant was a good thing, because General's breathing had stopped.

Someone, panting like a dog, was riding astride his body, strangling his throat with both hands.

This man was, unexpectedly, Dugu Mei.

Lu Xiaofeng rushed over and slapped him with the back of his palm, sending him flying outside. General's face looked like 'golden paper' [used in funeral ceremony], his heart still seemed to be beating, his eyes had not closed; he looked at Lu Xiaofeng with eyes that were begging for pity, as if he wanted to say something.

When at the brink of death someone wanted to say something, usually it was a big secret. Too bad he could not even speak a single word. When Lu Xiaofeng leaned over, his heart had stopped beating.

Dugu Mei was still panting for breath. Lu Xiaofeng grabbed him and said, "Did the two of you have any enmity?"

Dugu Mei shook his head.

"Was he going to kill you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Again Dugu Mei shook his head.

"Then why did you kill him?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Dugu Mei stared at him. His breathing gradually calmed, while his eyes gradually became sharp. Suddenly he asked back, "Do you really think that I am the 'Cold-Blooded' Dugu Mei?"

Anybody would ever dream of him suddenly asking that question. Lu Xiaofeng was no exception, "You are not?"

Dugu Mei sighed. Suddenly he said some more shocking words, "Take my pants off."

Lu Xiaofeng stared at him for a very long time. Suddenly he laughed and said, "I have never taken a man's pants off, but this time I am making an exception."

Dugu Mei was an old man, but his buttocks still looked firm and youthful.

"Do you see a tumor there?"

Naturally Lu Xiaofeng could not miss it. The tumor was big enough to be seen clearly from a li [1 li is approx. 1/2km or 1/3mile] away.

Dugu Mei said, "Use this blade to cut it open." He handed over a knife, the blade was razor sharp.

In all his life, Lu Xiaofeng has done countless bizarre things, but as he

received the knife, he could not help hesitating for a long time before he finally cut the tumor open.

Blood splashed, a golden ball, mixed with blood, burst out of the slit. "Cut the ball," Dugu Mei said.

Once it was cut, Lu Xiaofeng found out that this golden ball was made of wax, wrapped in golden paper. Inside was a piece of yellow thin, tough silk fabric, with this note written on it:

'Wudang's Fourth Disciple, Sun Bubian, in disguise under the Sect Leader's order on mission to investigate the whereabouts of a renegade. Signed.'

Underneath it, not only there was the official seal of Wudang Sect Leader, there was also Sect Leader Shi Zhenren's [Taoist Spiritual Master] personal signature in grass-style writing.

Dugu Mei said, "This is Sect Leader Master's proof of identity for me to be used in emergency."

Lu Xiaofeng looked at him in shock; finally he sighed and said, "Looks like you really are not Dugu Mei."

Sun Bubian said, "Before entering Wudang, I was a disciple of Hua's Four-Nun School. Hua Xiang's disguising skill is world-renown. But just to be safe, I also spent some time as a slave in Dugu Mei's school. It took me the whole ten months to learn his voice, appearance and mannerism. I did not make any move until I felt absolutely safe."

"You killed him?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Sun Bubian nodded. "I simply cannot let anybody find another Dugu Mei," he said.

"Who is this renegade you are investigating?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"The first one is Shi He," Sun Bubian replied.

"And now you have found him?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"That is also thanks to you," Sun Bubian said.

"Did Zhong Wugu die in your hands?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"He was also Wudang's renegade," Sun Bubian replied, "I simply cannot let him live."

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes flashed; he said, "Wasn't Jade Forest Swordsman Ye Lingfeng also Wudang disciple in the early days?"

"Both he and Zhong Wugu were layman-disciples of Wudang," Sun Bubian replied, "Both were driven out of school by Grand Master Mei Zhenren."

Mei Zhenren was Wooden Taoist's older martial brother; after wielding

power in Wudang Sect for seventeen years, he passed on the leadership to the current Sect Leader, Shi Yan.

Sun Bubian continued, "We investigated for a long time, and we all believed that using Dugu Mei's identity as a cover was the safest way; too bad ..."

"Too bad your secret was discovered by General," Lu Xiaofeng said.

With a bitter laugh Sun Bubian said, "Everybody thought that he was seriously injured, I was nearly deceived as well, who would have thought that the man hiding in General's Mansion to recover was not him; all along he had been watching me."

"What made him see your secret?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Sun Bubian said, "He was actually an old friend of Dugu Mei, he knew many secrets of Dugu Mei's early years, but I did not. He trapped me using words, I had no choice but to kill him to silence him."

"Why did you tell this secret to me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"This is an emergency," Sun Bubian replied, "I cannot stay silent, not only I want you to guard this secret, I also want you to help me. I cannot stay in this place much longer, I must go back to Wudang right away."

With a barely perceptible smile he said, "Naturally I have found out long ago that you are not the type of man who'd sell his friend. From the beginning I never believe that you really seduced Ximen Chuixue's wife.

That must be a ruse you guys concocted because you also want to uncover the secret of the Mansion of Spirits."

Lu Xiaofeng stared at him for a very long time. Suddenly he heaved a deep sigh and said, "Pity, pity ... what a pity ..."

"What do you mean, pity?" Sun Bubian asked.

"Pity that you are wrong," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Sun Bubian's countenance changed. With a harsh tone he said, "Did you forget who brought you here?"

"I did not forget," Lu Xiaofeng coldly said, "And I haven't forgotten that in these two days you have harmed me three times. If it was not for Old Sabre Honcho, I would have died in your hands."

"Are you saying that you did not see that I deliberately did all those things as a show in front of them?" Sun Bubian asked.

"I could not see it," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Sun Bubian stared at him. Suddenly he also heaved a deep sigh and said, "Good, you are very good."

"Not good, I am not good at all," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Sun Bubian said, "In that case, you deserve to die!" While shouting, his body had already pounced. His fingertips were still half a chi [Chinese foot, approx. 1ft or 1/3m], the hollow of his palm suddenly stuck out forward to strike Lu Xiaofeng's xuanji [lit. mysterious principle] acupoint. It was indeed the Little Celestial Star Palm technique from Wudang; moreover, his aim was amazingly accurate.

Too bad that by the time his palm arrived, Lu Xiaofeng's xuanji acupoint has already gone, along with his entire body.

Sun Bubian flipped his palm and launched 'Mysterious Bird Scattering the Sand', 'Goose Fall onto Flat Sand', and 'Northern Goose Flying South', one move three styles. In his hand, not only this kind of light but tightly knit Wudang Palm Technique appeared powerful, the changes also happened very fast.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "Priest Shi's disciple indeed performs as expected."

The sentence completed, all Sun Bubian's moves hit empty space. No matter how fast he moved, Lu Xiaofeng seemed to be always one step ahead of him. In term of Wudang Palm Technique, Lu Xiaofeng's knowledge did not seem to be less than his.

Suddenly he stopped. Staring at Lu Xiaofeng he said, "Did you train Wudang's martial art as well?"

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled. "I did not train Wudang's martial art," he said, "But I do have a lot of Wudang friends."

A glimmer of hope appeared in Sun Bubian's eyes. "In that case, you have to help me escape even more," he said.

"Too bad you are not my friend," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "You helped me once, you harmed me three times, and just now I yielded to you for eight moves; our books have been settled long ago."

Lu Xiaofeng added, "And now I am ready to make my move!"

The move he used was, unexpectedly, also Wudang's Little Celestial Star Palm technique; his palm facing out, the acupoint he struck was also xuanji acupoint.

Sun Bubian pulled his arm and turned around, trying to evade this palm strike, but Lu Xiaofeng's left palm struck the major artery on the back of his neck. As he fell down, he looked at Lu Xiaofeng with surprise in his eyes.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled and said, "Don't you know that I have two palms?"

Naturally Sun Bubian did, but he never imagined that a human hand could move that fast.

Old Sabre Honcho was sitting on his old, spacious wooden chair, watching Lu Xiaofeng; he seemed to enjoy the show very much.

Old chair is just like an old friend, it always make people feel very comfortable, very pleasant. Too bad Lu Xiaofeng still could not see his face.

Sun Bubian was right in front of him, but he did not even cast him a single glance; apparently his interest in Lu Xiaofeng was greater than his interest in anybody else.

"This man is a spy," Lu Xiaofeng said, "A spy from Wudang."

"Why didn't you kill him?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

"I have no right to kill people, I don't wish to kill either," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"In that case, you ought to let him go," Old Sabre Honcho said.

Lu Xiaofeng was caught by surprise, "Let him go?" he asked.

Old Sabre Honcho flatly said, "All real spies have already died long ago, no one has ever survived more than three days in here."

"So he is not?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"He is indeed a spy," Old Sabre Honcho said, "But not Wudang's spy; he is mine. Many years ago I sent him to go undercover at Wudang."

Lu Xiaofeng was stumped.

Old Sabre Honcho laughed again; a very cheerful laugh. "No matter

what, you should thank him."

"Why would I want to thank him?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because of him, I trust you completely," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

"So you also sent him to test me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Old Sabre Honcho smiled, "Some people are just born as spies, you can only send them out to do spy thing, and they never disappoint you."

"So this man is a natural born spy?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"From head to toes," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. Suddenly he kicked Sun Bubian, just like kicking a ball, sending him rolling away.

Old Sabre Honcho also sighed; he said, "Being a spy, there is only one disadvantage: these kinds of people are just like donkeys, oftentimes people give them a couple of kicks."

"I just kicked him once," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Who else are you going to kick?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

"Kick myself," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Are you also a spy?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

"I am not a spy," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "I am just a donkey, a stupid dumb ***." He looked furious, "Because with all my heart I was going to rescue someone else's daughter, but in return I got a slap; not only that, the slap happened to land on my neck."

Old Sabre Honcho sighed again and said, "You ought to know that I will never let you go to rescue her."

"But I don't," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Not only that swamp has deathly traps everywhere, it also has quicksand; once you are going down, not even your skeleton will survive. How could I put you at risk?"

"Why not?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because I need you," Old Sabre Honcho said, "General and Zhong Wugu are dead, right now you are my right arm. If I lose this arm, I am afraid the big plan I prepared for some time might vanish into thin air."

"Are you saying that right now you can't do without me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

His question was very unusual, and he worded it very cautiously. Actually, he could ask the same question using only six words, but this

time he was using sixteen words. [Trust me, Lu Xiaofeng's question above consists of 16 Chinese characters.]

But Old Sabre Honcho's answer was simple and blunt, "Yes."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

Just as he started to laugh, like an eagle his body soared, his hands were the claws. The prey of these claws was the bamboo rain hat on Old Sabre Honcho's head.

Old Sabre Honcho was still sitting, unmoving, but the claws caught an empty spot.

Even the quickest and craftiest fox or rabbit would have difficulty escaping eagle's claw, and Lu Xiaofeng's movement was faster and more accurate than eagle claw.

But he caught an empty spot, because Old Sabre Honcho, along with his chair, suddenly slipped out of the way, just like a kayak suddenly swept away by the torrent. The heavy wooden chair seemed to be one entity with his body.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, his body landed down slowly. He knew that since this first strike failed, the second one would be even more difficult to succeed.

"You wanted to see me?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

With a wry laugh Lu Xiaofeng replied, "You want me to die for you, at least you ought to let me see who you are."

"I don't look good," Old Sabre Honcho replied, "And I don't want you to die for me either. If this matter succeeds, it will be advantageous to everybody."

"What if it doesn't succeed?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Old Sabre Honcho said matter-of-factly, "You will die, which is not a big deal, since you are supposed to be dead anyway."

Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Did you establish this Mansion of Spirits just to get people in here to take risks for you?"

Old Sabre Honcho replied, "People who came here are people who had already died once; what's the harm in dying one more time?"

"Perhaps people who had already died once are more afraid to die," Lu Xiaofeng noted.

Old Sabre Honcho agreed with him on this point, "But what's the difference between hiding in this place and death?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. He admitted that the difference was indeed not much.

Old Sabre Honcho's dagger-like gaze looked at Lu Xiaofeng from behind the bamboo rain hat, "Would you stay here forever?" he asked.

Immediately Lu Xiaofeng shook his head.

"Other than the two of us, there are thirty-seven other residents, and you seem to have met them all," Old Sabre Honcho said, "What did you see?"

With a wry smile Lu Xiaofeng said, "I can't see anything."

Old Sabre Honcho seemed to be very pleased, "Of course you can't see anything, because all edges and sharp corners have been ground smooth, they all look like very ordinary, mediocre people."

"While the fact is?" Lu Xiaofeng prompted.

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Those who are able to come here, every single one of them is a martial art expert, everyone had a glorious history. Just like you, no one is willing to be left out. No one wishes to stay here for the rest of their life."

His voice was very cheerful, "As long as everybody can have the hope of seeing the light again, we can make this endeavor successful."

Finally Lu Xiaofeng could not bear not to ask, "When all is said and done, what is this endeavor, actually?"

"You'll find out very soon," Old Sabre Honcho said.

"When is very soon?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Like, right now," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

He had just finished speaking, the bell was ringing outside. Old Sabre Honcho stood up, his voice was even more cheerful, "But we must eat first," he said, "I guarantee that you will be very satisfied with our lunch."

The food was abundant, but the wine was very sparse; evidently Old Sabre Honcho wanted everybody to stay clear-headed.

But he himself drunk more than half ornamented golden goblet of Persian grape wine; and then surprisingly he poured another half a goblet.

It was the very first time Lu Xiaofeng saw him drinking wine. "It must be a very big day for him," Lu Xiaofeng thought, "He must have been waiting for this day for a very long time."

Everybody was eating silently with their heads down; they all ate very little, and most did not even drink. Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng could drink a bit more wine. It was only after he had had his fill that he leisurely sizing up these people.

Although everybody was wearing oversized, conservative long gown, under the dim light in the hall, there were still several people who appeared comparatively more eye-catching.

There was a big man with ringworms on his face about the size of golden coin; after drinking two cups of wine, each ringworm on his face appeared to shine like copper coins.

Another man had a purple face with long beard, he looked somewhat like the Guan Gong on the stage. And then there was a man with fat all over his face, his belly was sticking out like a ball. One man wore a serious expression, as if he was sitting in a torture chamber. And then there was an old granny whose teeth were nearly gone, yet she ate more than anybody else in the hall.

Still there were a few old, thin men who were exceptionally quiet. They were eye-catching, perhaps precisely because they were so quiet.

Other than Liu Qingqing, the youngest one had a round face like a pot, he appeared to be a midget who looked like a kid. The oldest were those quiet old men wearing black clothes.

As Lu Xiaofeng looked around, he tried to figure out the origin of these people from his memory. The first one that came to his mind was the 'Leopard' Hua Kui. [Translator's note: the first two characters of the word 'leopard' 金钱豹 are the same word as 'gold coin' above.]

This man was tall, the amount of wine he consumed was not less than that of Lu Xiaofeng's. His movements seemed slow; the ringworms on his face made him look a bit comical.

But when he shot his secret projectiles, nobody would ever think that he was comical. The Hua family of Jiangnan was the Jianghu's most

prestigious secret projectile family.

And Hua Kui was a direct descendant of Hua family. Some even said that in term of secret projectile skill, he could be ranked among the top three experts in the world.

Lu Xiaofeng has also noted that although he had drunk a lot of wine, his pair of hands still looked very steady.

That man with a solemn expression like a government official, could he be the torture chamber's Hall Master of the Seventy-two Strongholds of the Criminal Underworld of the yesteryear, the 'Pungent Hand Soul Chaser' Du Tiexin?

And that old granny; could she be the 'Mother Ape' of the 'Twin Apes of Qinling' [mountain range in Shaanxi]? Just because of several banner peaches that according to legend could promise longevity, she did not hesitate to cut her husband's neck, the 'Divine Physician Immortal Ape' Lou Dasheng.

Who were those old men in black who never talk? And that round-faced, big-headed dwarf?

Lu Xiaofeng was unable to continue his musing because right that moment Liu Qingqing was quietly pulling the corner of his clothes, and was quietly asking, "Where's your wife?"

Lu Xiaofeng was taken aback, and then he realized that she was talking about Ye Ling. "I heard she disappeared."

"Don't you want to know where she went?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"I don't," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Liu Qingqing pouted her mouth, and then with a deliberate sigh said, "Indeed there is not one good thing among men. But I simply must tell you."

She lowered her voice even more, "She must be underwater right now."

Lu Xiaofeng did not understand, "How could she be underwater? How do you know she is underwater?"

Liu Qingqing said, "Because, before leaving she stole other people's fish skin-like wetsuit, and four pairs of 'parting water flying fish harpoon'."

Lu Xiaofeng was even more surprised. There were two things that surprised him more:

-- Wetsuit and harpoon do not have to be used only underwater; these objects were equally useful in the miry water of the swamp. Could it be that Ye Ling was looking for her older sister? How did she know what happened at the swamp?

-- The fish skin-like wetsuit and flying fish harpoons were very famous underwater weapons in Jianghu, belonging to a very famous character.

Not only the name of 'Master of the Flying Fish Island' shook the seven seas, he was also very famous within the Wulin world of the Central Plains. Not only his water skill was extremely high, his swordsmanship was not weak either.

If this person had not died, if he was in here, he should also be very eye-catching. Yet Lu Xiaofeng had not found him.

Liu Qingqing was still waiting for his response, hence all along she did not open her mouth.

Lu Xiaofeng was lost in thought for a while; finally he asked, "Did Old Sabre Honcho know about it?"

Liu Qingqing chuckled and said, "It seems to me that there is nothing in here that Old Sabre Honcho did not know about."

-- Ye Ling went out to look for her sister, could it be that it was Old Sabre Honcho who incited her? Otherwise, how could she know Ye Xue's whereabouts?

Lu Xiaofeng did not ask about anything else, because he suddenly discovered that there was someone, without word without any noise, standing behind them.

When he looked back, he immediately saw a faceless face; unexpectedly it was the Soul Collector, who had never made any appearance before.

The atmosphere in the hall grew heavier and more serious. Everybody seemed to be a bit frightened by this faceless man.

He did not sit down; he merely stood motionless behind Old Sabre Honcho.

He wore a sword on his waist.

On the antique looking, yet elegant sword sheathe, there were seven marks that looked like they were made by blade. It was obvious that originally there were pearls, jades and jewels embedded above the marks.

If it was in Wudang, only the Sect Leader could wear the Seven-Star Treasured Sword on his waist!

Just then, Hai Qikuo suddenly stood up, and with a thunderous voice announced, "Operation Thunder has begun!"

[1] Orig. Quan Langjun: quan – dog, langjun – husband/master/playboy of rich family/pimp. Anybody has a better idea on how to translate this into English?

Chapter 11 – Operation Thunder

Translated by Foxs

These were the four stages of the Operation Thunder:

- Stage One: personnel assignment and mission statement of each person.
- Stage Two: assume disguises and go down the mountain in batches.
- Stage Three: assemble at the appointed place and prepare to strike.
- Stage Four: the actual operation.

The meeting today was only the first stage, and it already made people trembling with fear.

Now that the heavy and tense atmosphere in the hall had reached its peak, Old Sabre Honcho stood up.

"In this world, there are a lot of people who should be dead long ago, yet no one dared to take any action to punish them. There are a lot of matters that should be dealt with long ago, yet no one dared to take any action to do it. And now we are going to deal with exactly these people, to deal with exactly these matters."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly discovered that this man was a born leader; not only he was calm, cool-headed, and well-planned, he was extremely eloquence as well. In just a few words he was able to lay down the

objective of the operation very clearly.

“Our operation will be like thunderbolt from the sky, hence it is called the Operation Thunder.”

In that vast hall, the only thing that could be heard was the sound of breathing and the heartbeat of these people; everybody was waiting for him to continue.

Old Sabre Honcho paused his speech for a very long time, just like the short period of silence a moment before the storm; but it also seemed that he was giving the audience the chance to prepare their hearts to hear the earth-shattering sound of the thunderbolt.

“There are seven people that we have to deal with first.” He paused again before revealing the names of these seven people, “Shi Yan of Wudang, Tie Jian [lit. iron shoulder] of Shaolin, Wang Shidai [lit. ten-pouch king, or Wang The Ten-pouch; not sure if this is his name or simply a title] of Beggar Clan, Shuishang Fei [Flying-Over-The-Water] of Yangtze [River], Gao Xingkong [lit. skywalker] of Yandang [mountains, southeast Zhejiang], Priest Xiao Gu of Bashan [mountain, eastern Sichuan], and Yingyan Laoqi [lit. Hawk Eye the seventh] of the Twelve-Dock Alliance [see also Book 6].”

The hall, which was originally very quiet, grew even quieter, almost like inside a tomb, even the sound of breathing and heartbeat had stopped.

Although Lu Xiaofeng already knew that the matter he wanted to accomplish was a big matter, yet as he heard each name mentioned, he could not help but was shocked.

After a long time, some people started to wipe their sweats, some started to drink, and several people quietly ducked down underneath the table to throw up.

But Old Sabre Honcho's voice was even calmer, "If this operation is successful, not only it will create a bigger sensation than today, the Jianghu will be shaken, and it will be beneficial for everyone."

He paused again, "I have planned every detail of this operation well, it should have had a hundred percent chance of success; too bad that in every step of the way, it was difficult to avoid the unexpected. Therefore, there will be unavoidable dangers in this operation, so I won't force anybody to participate."

His blade-like gaze, from under the bamboo rain hat, swept past everybody's face in the hall. "Those who do not wish to participate may stand up now, I will definitely not force you."

Once again a hush blanketed the hall. Old Sabre Honcho slowly sat down, and to everybody's surprise, he poured another half a goblet of wine.

Lu Xiaofeng could not help picking up his cup as well, and found out that his palm was sweaty.

Up to this time, still no one stood up. But suddenly someone asked, "Those who do not wish to go, can they still stay in this place?"

"Yes," Old Sabre Honcho's answer was very sure, "You may stay as long as you wish."

The man who asked the question hesitated for a moment, but in the end he slowly stood up, followed by his big, protruding belly.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly remembered this man. Twenty years ago, there were four freaks in Jianghu, one was extremely fat, one extremely thin, one extremely tall, and one was extremely short. The one who was as fat as a pig was called Zhu Fei, which read backward became 'fat pig' [fei zhu, different characters].

But those who knew him knew that not only he was not a pig, but he was absolutely capable; those who had fought him knew even better that he was definitely not a pig, because not only his movements were very fast, he was ruthless as well. His 'Eighty-one Styles of Blooming Flowers Filling the Earth' from Ditang Saber Technique was a consummate skill that was rarely seen in Wulin.

Lu Xiaofeng knew for sure that this man must be Zhu Fei, but he had never expected that he would be the first person to stand up.

Zhu Fei was not a coward who was afraid of death.

"I can't go," he reasoned, "Because I am too fat, my appearance is too obvious; no matter what kind of disguise I am going to take, people will recognize me immediately."

It was a very good reason. So much so that Old Sabre Honcho had no

choice but to admit it, yet he could not help sighing in regret.

Zhu Fei's Ditang skill has been unmatched in Jianghu until today; clearly Old Sabre Honcho could use talents like this.

But he only sighed quietly without saying anything. Therefore, other people also found the guts to stand up.

-- If there is the first, it was only natural that there will also be the second, the third, and so on.

All along Old Sabre Honcho only looked on coldly, not even batting an eyelid; until the thirteenth person stood up, and then he was visibly emotionally moved.

This man had a plain appearance with wooden expression, he looked totally unremarkable.

But if a man could emotionally move Old Sabre Honcho, he was definitely not an ordinary character.

"You are not going either?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

This man's face was completely emotionless. "You said those who don't want to go to stand up, so I stood up," he said indifferently.

"Why don't you go?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

The man replied, "Because my wetsuit and harpoon went missing."

As soon as he said those words, Lu Xiaofeng could not help being shaken as well. He really never expected that this unremarkable man with wooden expression could be one of the six island masters of the South Sea Swords of the past, whose reputation was second only to the Master of the White Cloud Castle.

This man was unexpectedly the 'Flying Fish Island Master' Yu Huan!

On land, the Master of the White Cloud Castle was a swordsman whose name shook the heavens. On water, he was definitely could not be compared to Yu Huan.

In the operation this time, Old Sabre Honcho definitely could use someone with ultimate water skill like him.

With a loud 'crash', the wine cup in his hand was suddenly crushed and shattered.

Almost simultaneously, there was a miserable cry. The person sitting right next to Du Tiexin had just stood up, but he fell down again right on the table, crushing a row of wine cups so that wine spilled everywhere.

And then everybody could see blood flowing along the wine, dying the tablecloth red.

The pair of chopsticks in Du Tiexin's hand had already turned red; obviously it was also dyed red by the blood.

Yu Huan quickly turned around and asked, "Did you kill him?"

Du Tiexin admitted, "This is the first time I am using chopsticks to kill."

"Why did you kill him?" Yu Huan asked.

Du Tiexin replied, "Because he knew too many secrets. If he was alive, all of us might die instead."

Using the chopsticks stained with blood, he picked up a piece of scallop, which he then chewed slowly. He did not even blink his eyes. The 'Ruthless Pungent Hand' Du Tiexin was indeed able to kill without blinking an eye; a ruthless character.

Yu Huan stared at him; he said slowly, "He knew a lot of secrets, and I do too. Are you going to kill me as well?"

"That's right," Du Tiexin coldly replied. Still without blinking his eyes he added, "Those who don't go, don't even think that any one of you will walk away from this room alive."

Yu Huan's countenance changed; before he could say anything, someone else said, "If that was Old Sabre Honcho who said it, I would accept misfortunes as decreed by fate, but you ..."

He could not finish, because a chopstick was flying from the side, it pierced his left ear, and came out of his right.

The toothless old granny had only one chopstick left in her hand; she sighed while mumbling, "Double-log bridge is easy to cross, a single-log bridge is hard to pass; it looks like I will have to eat with my hands."

She really grabbed a piece of pork ribs with her hand and gnawed it with gusto with her two only teeth.

'Crash!' the person whose ears were pierced by the chopstick fell down right on top of bowls and cups on the table.

From the people who already stood up, some tried to stealthily sit back down. Du Tiexin coldly said, "Those who already stand up are not allowed to sit down."

Zhu Fei could not refrain from asking, "And whose idea is it?"

"It's our collective idea," Du Tiexin replied.

Zhu Fei hesitated. In the end he forced a laugh and said, "The fact is, it's not that I don't want to go, it's just that I am too fat. If you want me to go, you must roll me like noodle and make me a bit thinner."

"Alright," Du Tiexin said, "Roll him!"

The dwarf with round face and big head suddenly jumped up and shouted, "I'll do it!"

His head was as big as a bucket, but his body was thin and small. When he stood up, he looked like a round persimmon stuck onto a half-length chopstick or a pen; he looked really funny.

But Zhu Fei did not laugh, instead, his countenance changed. The man standing in front of him looked like a kid, but he was terribly frightened by this man.

Looking at the horror on his face, and then looking at the man's head, Lu Xiaofeng's countenance also changed. Could it be that this man was one of the Western Top Ghost Bunch, the one with the blackest heart and pungent hand, the 'Big Head Ghost King' Sikong Dou ['dou' means bucket]?

He was not mistaken, because Zhu Fei really shouted the name, "Sikong Dou, this has nothing to do with you, what do you want?"

"I want to roll you," Sikong Dou said. He also had a pair of chopsticks, which he then pressed between his palms, as if he was rubbing Zhu Fei in between his hands. He exerted his strength and rolled the chopsticks. Suddenly a cloud of powder fell down like snow.

When he opened his hands, the chopsticks had disappeared. Unexpectedly his child-like hands were able to turn the pair of chopsticks, which could be used to kill just like a pair of sharp swords, into a pile of dust.

Zhu Fei's face twisted, it was as if his entire body had turned soft as he collapsed into a chair. But when Sikong Dou was ready to pounce, he suddenly dropped down to hide under the table. Exerting his strength

onto his knees, he crawled across seven, eight tables; his movement was unbelievably nimble.

Too bad the tables were not joined together into a loop. Sikong Dou already leaped out with ten fingers spread out like claws; as soon as Zhu Fei appeared from under the table, he leaped down to strike.

Who would have thought that Zhu Fei's movement was even faster? With his right elbow he pushed, and immediately he disappeared underneath the table on the opposite side. 'Pop!' Sikong Dou's ten fingers were embedded onto the tabletop. And when he pulled his hands, ten holes appeared on the table.

Zhu Fei hid under the table and refused to come out. Using his right arm Sikong Dou swept the table, sending bowls, cups, and chopsticks crashing to the floor; soup, dishes and wine splashed onto someone, the quiet, silent old man in black.

Sikong Dou turned his hands over, he was going to tear the table apart, but suddenly someone said, "Wait a moment."

A pair of chopsticks stretched out with the sharp pointy tips facing up, aiming the major artery on Sikong Dou's hand. If he continued moving his hand, he could forget about using this hand ever again.

Fortunately his reaction was very quick, instantly he pulled back his strength and stopped the momentum of his palm. The four old men dressed in black were still sitting quietly in their respective chairs, staring at him with cold eyes.

Sikong Dou seemed to have noticed them only now; drawing back the corners of his mouth he smiled widely and said, "I was wondering if the four gentlemen would let me kick the fat pig out of under your table?"

The old man, who was splashed by the soup and wine, coldly said, "Would not."

"Are you going to protect him?" Sikong Dou asked.

The old man in black said, "People don't cross me, I don't cross people."

"Who crossed you?" Sikong Dou asked.

"You," the old man in black replied.

Sikong Dou no longer smiled, "What if I crossed you?" he said.

The old man in black said, "If someone crosses me, then he is not a person."

"Who's not a person?" Sikong Dou asked.

"You," the old man in black replied.

"I am indeed not a person," Sikong Dou said, "I am a ghost."

The old man in black said, "You are not a ghost either, you are a

domestic animal ...” He then added coldly, “I don’t kill people, I kill animals. Killing one or two animals cannot be considered I am breaking my vow not to kill.”

Sikong Dou clenched his hands into fists, the joints in his entire body were cracking, his round pot-like face turned into metal blue.

Old Sabre Honcho suddenly said, “This man is useful to me, could Mr. Wu let him go this time?”

The old man in black hesitated for a moment; finally he nodded, “Very well, I only want one of his hands.”

Sikong Dou laughed; he roared in laughter, but his laughter sounded like a crying ghost.

His left hand was trained in White Bone Claw, his right hand was trained in Black Devil Claw; he had spent painstaking effort for more than twenty years on either one on his hands, asking for one of his hands was equal to asking half of his life.

The old man in black said, “I want your left hand.”

“Alright,” Sikong Dou said, “I’ll give it to you!”

As soon as the word ‘you’ came out of his mouth, both claws moved together, one hand became snowy white, the other turned pitch-black.

He was unleashing the full power of the entire twenty-year of training. Anything touched by his fingertips, even a rock, would have ten more holes on it.

The old man in black was still sitting motionless; he merely sighed while sending out his sleeve, rolling out like a cloud.

There was a crisp 'crack!' like the sound of breaking radish, followed by miserable scream. Sikong Dou flew out and hit the wall.

By the time his body slid down to the floor, he could no longer move; both of his hands were drenched with blood, all his ten fingers were broken.

The old man in black sighed. "I only wanted one of his hands," he said.

Another white-haired old man coldly said, "If you only wanted one hand, you did not need to use 70% of your strength."

The old man in black replied, "I have not made my move in many years, I did not know the limit of my power; plus I overestimated him a bit."

The white-haired old man said, "Therefore, you were wrong; even domestic animal has life, you have violated your vow against killing living beings."

"Yes," the old man in black said, "I was wrong. Buddha have mercy."

Four men put their palms together, while reciting the name of Buddha. They slowly stood up and faced Old Sabre Honcho, "We are asking to be excused, to face the wall and ponder about our misdeeds for three days, as a token of our gratitude to the Master of the Mansion."

Unexpectedly Old Sabre Honcho also stood up and said, "It was he who followed the path to his own doom, why did Mister blame yourself?"

The old man in black said, "If Master of the Mansion has any errands for us, we will definitely come to receive your order."

Old Sabre Honcho seemed to be relieved; he immediately cupped his fist and said, "Please."

"Please," the old man in black replied.

The four of them walked out of the room, slowly and peacefully. When they reached Lu Xiaofeng, they suddenly stopped in front of him.

The white-haired old man suddenly asked, "Lu Gongzi [young master], have you seen Master Bitter Gourd lately?"

"I saw him several times last year," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

The white-haired old man said, "Master's culinary skill is amazing, his vegetarian dish is number one under the heavens, presumably Lu Gongzi's luck in eating fine dishes is not shallow."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "That's right," he said.

"In that case," the white-haired old man said, "Presumably he is as strong as before."

"That's right," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

The white-haired old man put his palms together and said, "Buddha have mercy, the Heaven blesses those who do good deeds ..."

The four of them recited the name of Buddha together, and then walked out slowly, their steps were still peaceful and smooth; but Lu Xiaofeng's hands and feet turned ice-cold. He finally figured out the background of these four old men.

Looking at how respectful Old Sabre Honcho was to them, looking at the power behind the 'floating cloud flying sleeve', looking at their devotion to Buddha, he remembered.

At first he could not figure it out; because they grew hairs and shed their Buddhist robes, he did not think that they were monks who had left their homes. Even more, he would not have thought that they were Shaolin Temple's Five Arhats [luohan].

Five Arhats were originally siblings, who shaved their heads together to become monks and entered Shaolin. Right now there were only four of them, because the oldest brother, Wu Long [lit. no dragon] Arhat had died.

In their youth, these five brothers ran amuck in Jianghu, killing people unscrupulously, and were known as 'Dragon, Tiger, Lion, Elephant and Panther', the Five Ferocious Beasts. Each one of them had hands that were reeking with blood.

But then they laid down the butcher's knife and became Buddha on the spot. Henceforth the notorious Five Ferocious Beasts became Shaolin Temple's Five Arhats: Wu Long, Wu Hu, Wu Shi, Wu Xiang, Wu Bao [no dragon, no tiger, no lion, no elephant, no panther, respectively], with the heart of Buddha.

Wu Long was in charge of the Scripture Depository Pavilion, plus he was promoted to be an elder Protector of the Law. Nobody knew what happened, but one night he was really drunk and toppled a candlestick, and nearly burned the Scripture Depository Pavilion, which was located in the middle to Shaolin Temple complex, to the ground.

In his rage, Head Abbott punished him with ten years of sitting against the wall in meditation, plus twenty flogging. Wu Long was humiliated, he died of hatred. His brothers [orig. hands and feet] joined their hearts, the surviving four Arhats changed from being devoted to Buddha into filled with murderous intent; unexpectedly they did not hesitate to violate the law of Heaven and went as far as attempting to assassinate the Head Abbott.

Jianghu people all knew that their assassination attempt was not successful, but nobody knew their whereabouts, even whether they were dead or alive. Even more baffling was that Arhat Wu Long has already washed his heart and renewed his face early on, why did he suddenly become very drunk?

This matter has become one of the mysteries of the Wulin world, just like nobody knew why Shi He was suddenly expelled from Wudang.

But now Lu Xiaofeng knew that Wu Long's drunkenness must have something to do with Monk Bitter Gourd – eating Monk Bitter Gourd's unparalleled-throughout-the-world vegetarian dishes, one would inevitably drink several cups of wine.

Just now they were inquiring about Monk Bitter Gourd's well-being; presumably they were hoping that he was still alive, so that they could personally extract revenge on him.

Just now Wu Bao suddenly made his move, which caused a man had his bones broken and died a violent death, it was clear that the hatred and malicious intent in his heart ran very, very deep.

The one they hated the most was not Monk Bitter Gourd, but Shaolin. Precisely like Shi He hated Wudang, and Gao Tao hated Phoenix Tail Clan.

Mount Ba has abundant mineral resources; not only that, rumor has it that there was gold sand over there. Naturally Gu Feiyun wanted to take over the business of Gu Family Taoist Monastery from his [paternal] cousin, Priest Xiao Gu [lit. little Gu, the same surname as Gu Feiyun].

Hai Qikuo had established his business on the sea; naturally he wanted seize control of the monopoly on Yangtze River from Shuishang Fei.

Du Tiexin's hatred toward the Beggar Clan was as deep as the sea. Most likely the purple-faced, long-bearded man was the 'Hundred Victory

Saber King' Guan Tianwu, who in the past struggled over the leadership of Yandang Sect against Gao Xingkong.

In his operation this time, Old Sabre Honcho was trying to catch all their enemies in one net; naturally they were willing to make an all-out effort.

But most of these 'targets' were people of sect-leadership status, under normal circumstances, it would be very difficult to see them, plus their headquarters were far apart from each other; how could they catch everybody in a single operation?

Old Sabre Honcho was ready with an explanation, "The thirteenth of the fourth month is the anniversary of Wudang's Mei Zhenren's death; it is also the tenth anniversary of Shi Yan taking control of the sect leadership. I hear he wanted to appoint the Sect Leader Disciple to succeed him in unifying Wudang on that very same day."

He let out a cold laugh and then continued, "On that day, naturally there will be dignitaries converging on Mount Wudang, the mountain will be bustling with noise and excitement, Tie Jian and Wang Shidai, those people will most likely be among the distinguished guests."

"Are we going to make our move on that day?" Actually Lu Xiaofeng wanted to ask this question, but Du Tiexin has preceded him.

Old Sabre Honcho nodded. "That's the reason we must hurry to Mount Wudang before the twelfth of the fourth month," he said.

But if all these people made their moves together and arrived at the mountain area on the same day, it would definitely create quite a sensation in the Wulin world. This operation must be executed in absolute secrecy, they must not beat the grass to scare the snake.

“Therefore, not only we must go in batches, everybody must be in disguise.”

This matter was also part of Old Sabre Honcho’s well-planned program.

Housekeeper said, “The details of this operation have been arranged, gentlemen and ladies need not worry.”

Old Sabre Honcho said, “I can assure you that the person in charge of your disguise is an expert that is absolutely without equal throughout the world. Although he cannot make you shedding your mortal body and exchanging your bones [idiom, turn over a new leaf (in Taoist principle)], and turn you into somebody else, but he can definitely change you so that others will not be able to see your true identity.”

Right now there was only one question left, “How are we going to bring our weapons up the mountain?”

No one allowed to bring any weapon up Mount Wudang, all weapons must be left by the Shedding-sword Rock by the bank of Shedding-sword Pond.

Old Sabre Honcho said, “But I can assure you that on the eve of the D-Day, everybody can go to Hidden Snow to get hold of a weapon that you

can use."

Old Lady Lou has just finished nibbling on a piece of chicken drumstick, she interrupted him by asking, "Where is that Hidden Snow?"

Old Sabre Honcho laughed and said, "Hidden Snow is actually a hidden place, *i.e.* the lavatory."

"If it is the lavatory, why did they call it Hidden Snow?" Old Lady Lou asked.

"That is the term that outsiders use," Old Sabre Honcho replied, "There are two versions of the origin of that name."

-- 'Snow' is the Dhyana Master Ming Jiao [lit. clear/bright feeling] of the Xuedou [lit. snow hole/aperture] Mountain, 'Hidden' is the Ling Yin [Hidden Spirit] Temple of Hangzhou. Because one time Xuedou was in charge of the lavatory at the Ling Yin Temple, the people at the monastery called it the Xue Yin [hidden snow] Lavatory.

-- Because Fuzhou's Divine Monk obtained Five Awareness while cleaning the hidden place while living at the snowy peak, hence the name 'Hidden Snow'.

Old Lady Lou did not wish to ask further. Housekeeper already served her a dish of roast chicken, so that she could stuff her mouth with chicken drumstick.

How could they stuff Yu Huan and the others' mouth? The secrets they

knew were indeed too many!

These people's faces were already completely devoid of any color, because they themselves knew that there is usually only one way to deal with this kind of thing!

Only dead men tell no tales.

To seek a way to live in the midst of death, there is usually only one way as well, "You want to kill me to shut my mouth, I will kill you first!"

Yu Huan suddenly leaped up, just like a flying fish leaping out of the water.

Originally he had five pairs of Flying Fish Harpoons, Ye Ling stole four pairs. The remaining one pair was kept in his sleeves, right now these harpoons have turned into a pair of lightning about to strike Old Sabre Honcho.

Old Sabre Honcho did not move; but Shi He, who was standing behind him, did. The sword inside the Seven-Star leather sheathe turned into a rainbow.

The rainbow met the lightning. 'Ding, ding!' the lightning suddenly broke, two pieces of copper tips fell from the air, the rainbow also vanished, the sword ray already penetrated Yu Huan's chest.

He looked at the remaining Flying Fish Harpoons in his hands, he looked at the sword blade penetrating his chest, and then he looked up

to see the man without a sword standing in front of him, as if he still could not believe that it was really happening.

Shi He was also looking at him with cold eyes. Suddenly he asked, "How's my sword compared to Ye Gucheng's Flying Immortal to the Outer Heaven?"

Yu Huan gritted his teeth without even said a word, the corner of the mouth on his twisted face seemed to reveal a mocking smile, as if he was saying, "Ye Gucheng is dead, so what if you are better than him?"

Shi He understood his meaning, suddenly he twisted his hand, which was grasping the sword hilt, from the wrist, hence turning the blade as well. Yu Huan's face twisted even more. Suddenly he roared and pounced forward. Blood splashed from his chest as the sword went through his body to the other end.

Lu Xiaofeng could not bear to watch. There are still several people who were standing up, he could not watch them die one by one in front of his eyes.

He quietly got up and quietly went out.

The fog was wet and cold. He took a very deep breath, filling his chest with the cold mist. He must calm down.

"You don't like killing?"

It was Old Sabre Honcho's voice. Old Sabre Honcho was following him

out, he was also sucking the cold and wet foggy air.

Lu Xiaofeng indifferently said, "I like drinking, but watching other people drink is another matter altogether."

He did not turn around to look at Old Sabre Honcho, but he could hear the smile in Old Sabre Honcho's voice; obviously Old Sabre Honcho was very pleased with his answer.

"I don't like watching either," Old Sabre Honcho said, "It doesn't matter what, doing it ourselves is always more interesting than watching."

Lu Xiaofeng was silent for a moment. Suddenly he laughed and said, "There are things that you don't seem to like doing it yourself."

"Oh?" Old Sabre Honcho said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "You knew Ye Ling stole Yu Huan's wetsuit and flying fish harpoon, you also knew what she was doing, yet you did not stop her."

"Indeed I did not," Old Sabre Honcho admitted.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "You did not let me rescue Ye Xue, but you did not go either; why did you let her go?"

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Because I know Ye Lingfeng can't possibly hurt her."

"You're sure about that?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Old Sabre Honcho nodded; his voice suddenly became hoarse, "Because she is the real daughter of Ye Lingfeng!"

Lu Xiaofeng sucked a mouthful of air again, as if he was completely oblivious of the pain and hatred in Old Sabre Honcho's voice, "There is one more thing that you did not want to do yourself."

Old Sabre Honcho waited for him to continue.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Is it true that you want Shi He to deal with Wudang's Shi Yan; Tiger, Panther and his brothers to deal with Shaolin's Tie Jian?"

"That is their own enmity," Old Sabre Honcho replied, "They are the ones who wanted to personally resolve the matter."

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "Can Du Tiexin deal with Wang Shidai?"

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Over the years, his martial art has improved tremendously, besides, there will be Old Lady Lou as his backup."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Priest Xiao Gu shouldn't be Cousin's match, Shuishang Fei against Hai Qikuo, which one would you bet will win?"

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Yangtze River is a fertile ground, Shuishang Fei is already so fat that he can't fly anymore [reminder: Shuishang Fei means

‘flying-over-the-water’]. Whether it is on land or in the water, I will bet with ten-to-one handicap that Hai Qikuo will win.”

Lu Xiaofeng said, “But Guan Tianwu has been defeated by Gao Xingkong three times.”

Old Sabre Honcho said, “Those three times, there was someone lending a helping hand to Gao Xingkong in secret.”

“Who?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

With a cold laugh Old Sabre Honcho said, “You should have heard, Gao Xingkong criss-crossing Yangtze River unhindered and Wudang Sect Leader’s death have nothing to do with each other, why did he have to rush over immediately? Could it be that Wudang disciple do the deed in secret? The strife over Yandang Sect’s leadership, why would Wudang disciple want to meddle in other people’s business?”

Lu Xiaofeng did not want to ask too many questions; he said, “In that case, there is only one left, Yingyan Laoqi. Even if Housekeeper cannot keep him in check, with the addition of Hua Kui, it should be more than enough.”

“Hua Kui has other task,” Old Sabre Honcho said, “Gao Tao has no use for assistant either.”

Lu Xiaofeng said, “In that case, the seven main targets are being taken care of; not only that, their success rate is over ninety percent.”

"Over ninety percent," Old Sabre Honcho echoed.

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled, and then said, "So, what do you want me to do? To deal with those Taoist priests who sweep the floor, wash the dishes and fetch the firewood?"

"What I want you to do is the key to this operation's success or failure," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

"What is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Old Sabre Honcho also chuckled, and then said, "Right now what you know is already too much, I will tell you the rest the night of the twelfth of the fourth month."

He patted Lu Xiaofeng's shoulder and said, "So tonight there is no harm in you relaxing, I can even say that you may want to get drunk, because tomorrow you may sleep the whole day."

"You want me to wait until the day after tomorrow to go down the mountain?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"You will belong to the last batch going down the mountain," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

"Who else is in my group?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Housekeeper, Old Lady Lou, Cousin, Hook, and Liu Qingqing," Old

Sabre Honcho replied.

He laughed again and said, "In all good plays, the best act is always saved for the last; naturally you want to be the last to enter the stage."

"Besides," Lu Xiaofeng added matter-of-factly, "With them following me into the stage, at least there won't be any possibility I will die half-way in somebody else's hands."

Old Sabre Honcho's laughter was even more cheerful, "Don't worry," he said, "Even if you meet Ximen Chuixue along the way, he can't possibly recognize you."

"Because the person in charge of my disguise is an expert that is absolutely without equal throughout the world," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Old Sabre Honcho laughed and said, "If someone is able to disguise himself as a dog, do you have any reason to worry?"

He was talking about Canine Master.

Canine Master's responsibility was precisely to alter everybody's appearance so that nobody could recognize them. But what would happen after he finished his job?

-- I just want you to take me along when you go.

Finally Lu Xiaofeng understood what he meant; he was certainly able to

see the crisis he was in.

Old Sabre Honcho looked up to the sky, he took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. The plowing and weeding time was over, now he was just waiting for the harvest. He seemed to catch sight of the fruits already sprouting from the branches.

Each fruit represented one human head.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly turned around to look at him and asked, "What about you? Everything has been taken care of, what are you going to do?"

Old Sabre Honcho said, "I am the creditor, I am just going to wait for you to pay me back the investment I spend on you."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Wudang has a debt toward Shi He, Shaolin has a debt toward Tiger, Panther and his brothers, who has a debt toward you?"

"Everybody has a debt toward me," Old Sabre Honcho said.

He patted Lu Xiaofeng's shoulder again, and said with a smile, "Didn't you also owe me a bit?"

Lu Xiaofeng also exhaled the air from his lungs, but it seemed like the cold and damp fog remained in his chest.

He knew that whoever owed Old Sabre Honcho anything, sooner or

later he would have to pay him back double.

And he could not afford it. Yet.

Canine Master was lying on the bed, staring blankly at the ceiling.

He really wanted to get some sleep, he had already closed his eyes many times before, yet sleep seemed to elude him.

When the rabbit has been caught, the hunting dog will be boiled.

Right now he felt like he was already in the pot, and very soon the soup inside the pot would be boiling; how could he fall asleep?

In the dead of the night, the window suddenly creaked, someone flew in as if swept-in by the wind. It was Lu Xiaofeng.

Canine Master has not even made any noise, Lu Xiaofeng already covered his mouth, "Are you the only one in this house?" he whispered.

He was the only one. Because nobody wanted to live in a house where dog skin and human skin were hanging everywhere. Nobody could stand the foul odor of cooking glue and leather emitted by the copper pot on the stove.

The art of disguise is not as effortless and pleasant as people imagined it to be. To make a perfect human skin mask, not only it required a pair of steady and skillful hands, it needed tremendous patience as well.

Lu Xiaofeng already knitted his brows from the stench of the smoke emitted from the pot; he could not help asking, "What are you cooking?"

"Cowhide glue," Canine Master replied, "Human skin mask must be affixed using cowhide glue, otherwise it will fall off."

"Human skin mask?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "You really use human skin to make masks?"

Canine Master said, "Only real human skin masks can completely change someone's facial features, plus every single mask must be fixed in accordance with that person's original face first."

Suddenly he smiled to Lu Xiaofeng and said, "I already made one to fit the shape of your face as well."

With a wry smile Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Also made of human skin?"

"Genuine goods at fair prices," Canine Master replied.

"How many masks did you make in total?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Thirty one masks," Canine Master replied.

And then he added, "Other than Old Sabre Honcho, everybody gets one."

Why didn't Old Sabre Honcho need any disguise? Could it be that he was going to Wudang still wearing that deep-basket like bamboo rain hat?

Lu Xiaofeng asked, "After these people wear the disguise, will there be any special mark on their faces?"

"Not the least bit," Canine Master replied.

"If everybody does not recognize anybody, won't it be difficult to avoid killing the wrong person?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Absolutely not," Canine Master replied.

"How come?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Canine Master said, "Because each group of people going down the mountain will have different task from each other. Some will deal with Wudang's Taoist priests, some will deal with Shaolin's monks. As long as this particular group of people can remember what the other people look like after they are wearing the disguise, they won't kill the people in their own group by mistake."

Lu Xiaofeng was deep in thought for a moment. Suddenly he lowered his voice, "Can you leave a special mark on each group of people? For example, a pockmark, or perhaps a mole?"

Canine Master stared at him with some kind of strange expression in his eyes; after a very long time he asked quietly, "Do you have confidence that you will be able to take me along when you leave?"

"I am sure of it," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Canine Master exhaled. He said, "You promised me, of course I also promise you."

"How are you going to do it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Canine Master winked; he said, "Right now I don't have any idea yet, but by the time we are leaving together, I will tell you."

It seems like the people in this place were just like the Old Sabre Honcho, other than self, nobody trusted anybody else.

Sometimes they did not even trust themselves.

Canine Master suddenly asked, "Isn't Widow Hua in your group and you are going to leave together?"

"Most probably yes," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"How do you want me to disguise her?" Canine Master asked, "Do you want me to make her old and ugly, or young and beautiful?"

"The older the better, the uglier the better," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"And why is that?" Canine Master asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Because no one will believe that Lu Xiaofeng is with an old and ugly woman, therefore, no one will believe that I am Lu Xiaofeng."

"Hence the older and the uglier she is, the more you will feel safe," Canine Master said, "Not only others will not recognize you, you yourself will not be tempted."

He winked and laughed, "These days you really have to preserve your strength," he said, "Being with a young and beautiful widow, preserving your strength is indeed not an easy thing to do."

Lu Xiaofeng stared at him; he said coldly, "Do you know what your problem is?"

Canine Master shook his head.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Your problem is that you talk too much."

Canine Master smiled sheepishly and said, "As long as you take me out of here, I promise that I won't even say a word along the way."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Even if you wanted to talk, I have a way to shut your mouth."

Canine Master could not refrain himself from asking, "What is it?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I am a government official from the Capital who's 'announcing old age and returning home' [i.e. to retire from public life]; not only I bring along a few attendants and followers, I also bring along a dog."

He smiled before continuing, "And you are that dog. Naturally a dog cannot speak human words."

Canine Master stared at him for half a day; finally he let out a bitter laugh and said, "That's right, I am that dog. I just ask you to never forget that this particular dog only eats meat, I cannot gnaw on bones."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "But you must also never forget that a disobedient dog will not only have to gnaw on bones, it will also have to eat sh1t."

He roared in laughter as he walked out of the room. Suddenly he turned his head around and asked, "Ye Xue and Ye Ling are supposed to be in which group?"

"I don't know either," Canine Master replied, "In the list that Old Sabre Honcho gave me, both sisters' names are not listed."

The night grew even deeper.

Lu Xiaofeng sat down in the cold fog, there was a war going on in his heart.

-- Should he go to the swamp to look for those sisters? Or should he drink and get really drunk?

His choice was to get really drunk.

Even if he could not find them, he did not have to be drunk; yet he was drunk, as drunk as mud.

Why did he have to be drunk?

Could it be that he had a painful problem in his heart that cannot be divulged to anybody else?

The third day of the fourth month, afternoon. The sky was clear, but the air was foggy.

By the time Lu Xiaofeng woke up, his head ached so much that he felt it was about to burst open; his mouth felt like sawdust, and his mood was a total washout, just like the feeling he had when he was seriously ill.

He woke up for a long time before he finally opened his eyes, and as soon as he opened his eyes, he almost jumped in fright.

How could Old Lady Lou sit on his bedside? How long has she been staring at him?

He rubbed his eyes, and was finally able to see that the old granny sitting on his bedside, nibbling on some fava beans was not Old Lady Lou at all, yet she couldn't be a lot younger than Old Lady Lou.

"Who are you?"

He couldn't resist asking, but the old granny's answer shocked him.

"I am your wife," the old granny's cracked dry lips seemed to be drawn back into a cold laugh, "I have been married to you for fifty years, so if you don't want to recognize me now, you can't."

Lu Xiaofeng stared at her in disbelief. Suddenly he roared into loud laughter, he laughed so hard that he rolled about on his bed.

The old granny was Liu Qingqing, he recognized her voice.

"How did you turn into something like this?"

"Because that b@stard has seen a ghost in a clear day light; I want to be a bit younger, but he did not let me."

Liu Qingqing crushed a fava bean with her teeth, and said with hatred in her voice, "And now I look like this; are you happy?"

Lu Xiaofeng deliberately blinked his eyes and said, "Why would I be happy?"

Liu Qingqing said, "Because you were wishing that I would be the older the better, the uglier the better. Because all along you wanted to avoid me, as if you are afraid that I would swallow you alive."

Lu Xiaofeng still pretended he did not understand, "Why would I want to avoid you?"

Liu Qingqing said, "If you are not avoiding me, why did you drink every day like a dead man?"

She laughed coldly and said, "Actually, I am aware that you do not dare to touch me, but I am a bit curious; you are supposed to sleep with an old granny like me every night, how can you stand it?"

Lu Xiaofeng sat up on his bed, "Why would I want to sleep with you every night?" he asked.

"Because you are a government official from the Capital who's 'announcing old age and returning home', and I am your wife," Liu Qingqing said, "Moreover, the wife is a notorious vinegar jar [i.e. person of a jealous nature]."

Lu Xiaofeng was speechless.

Liu Qingqing continued, "I also have good news for you, our son is coming along with us."

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked again, "Who is our son?" he asked.

"Cousin," Liu Qingqing replied.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly fell flat on his back on the bed, and stayed really still.

Liu Qingqing roared in laughter; suddenly she pounced on him and said with a giggle, "Although my body is old, my heart is not, I still want to do it every day, you can't even play dead on me."

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "I am not playing dead, but if you want me to do that thing with an old granny like you every day, I am going to die for real."

Liu Qingqing laughed and said, "You can always close your eyes, and just try really hard to imagine what I used to look like."

She was laughing so hard that she was out of breath, "Besides, don't you men often say that as long as you close your eyes, all women in the world are just the same?"

At last now Lu Xiaofeng understood the meaning of 'you reap what you sow'.

This hole was dug by him, and now the one falling head first into it was precisely himself.

By the time Canine Master arrived, Liu Qingqing was still gasping for breath.

Watching an old woman, so old that her teeth were falling apart, lying side-by-side with a young man while gasping for breath, if one can refrain from laughing, this person's ability is indeed not small.

Canine Master's ability was indeed not small.

Unexpectedly he did not laugh; unexpectedly he could pretend not to see. But when Lu Xiaofeng stood up, he suddenly gave him a wink as if saying, "What do you think?"

Lu Xiaofeng really wished he could dig these two eyeballs out and gave them to Liu Qingqing to eat just like the fava beans.

Fortunately, before he could make his move, an old granny that was even older than Liu Qingqing and Old Lady Lou combined stuck out her head from the door, and said with a laugh, "Master and Madame had better get ready, we are going to set off at first light."

This person was, naturally, the Housekeeper.

Who would have thought that the Hall Master Gao of the Phoenix Tail Clan's three inner halls could turn into someone like this?

Instantly Lu Xiaofeng felt a bit better; suddenly he raised his voice, "Where is that precious son of mine? Quickly summon him here to pay his respect to the old man."

Cousin, who looked about twenty years younger, had no choice but coming in with a frown on his face.

With a straight face Lu Xiaofeng said, "Government officials from Beijing always have a bit stricter household rule, even during traveling we must not be negligent; therefore, from now on you must come to kowtow and pay your respect to me every day. Do you understand?"

Cousin only nodded.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Since you understand, why don't you hurry up to get on your knees and kowtow?"

Watching Cousin really went down on his knees, Lu Xiaofeng's mood was even better. No matter what, being the old man is always much better than being the son.

One thing for sure, he would not be lonely along the way; other than a wife, he had a son, a housekeeper, and a housemaid.

He even had a dog.

"Can't take the dog along!"

Hai Qikuo has had the hook on his severed hand removed, the useless bare stump of his hand hidden inside his sleeve looked awkward and funny.

But his expression was very serious, his manner was even more firm, "We absolutely must not bring him along."

"Is this Old Sabre Honcho's order?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Of course it is," Hai Qikuo replied.

"You are going to kill him, aren't you?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Yes," Hai Qikuo replied.

Now that Canine Master's job was done, they did not have any scruple toward him.

"Who is going to kill him?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Me," Hai Qikuo replied.

"Without the hook you can still kill people?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I can kill anytime," Hai Qikuo replied.

"Very well," Lu Xiaofeng said, "In that case, go ahead and kill me now."

Hai Qikuo's countenance changed, "What do you mean?"

Lu Xiaofeng dryly said, "What I mean is very simple: he goes, I go, he dies, I also die."

Of course he could not die.

Hai Qikuo looked at Cousin, Cousin looked at Housekeeper, Housekeeper looked at Liu Qingqing.

Liu Qingqing looked at Canine Master; suddenly she asked, "Are you a male dog, or a female dog?"

"I am male," Canine Master replied.

Liu Qingqing said, "Some dogs love to sleep by their master's bed at night. How about you?"

"I love to sleep by the door," Canine Master replied, "And once I asleep, I will be like a dead dog, I won't hear anything."

Liu Qingqing laughed and said, "As long as it is not a female dog, I don't care how many dogs he want to bring, I have no objection."

"Anybody has any objection?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Hai Qikuo sighed. "No," he said.

"Not even half a person," Housekeeper said.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at Cousin, "What about you?"

Cousin chuckled and said, "I am a filial son, I am ten times more obedient than a dog."

Therefore, with four people and a dog, our Old Master Lu grandly set off from the Mansion of Spirits.

This was the second time he left this place. He knew that this time he would never come back again.

Chapter 12 – Panic in the Haunted Mansion

Translated by Foxs

The fifth of fourth month. Clear.

Lu Xiaofeng was facing a very clear bronze mirror with a smile on his face.

Seeing the reflection in the mirror was not his own, although it was kind of strange, it was very interesting.

Naturally the old man in the mirror was not as handsome as his original face, yet it was a dignified and lordly old man, not at all like a lecherous, alcoholic old man whose one of his feet had already stepped into the coffin.

This minor point has no doubt made him very happy. His only regret was that he could not wash his face.

Therefore, all he could do was just perfunctorily wiping his face with a dry cloth and joyfully rinse his mouth with water, before finally turned around to look at the old granny on the bed.

He shook his head and sigh, "Canine Master really should make you a bit younger," he said, "Now it simply looks like you are my mother."

Liu Qingqing gnashed her teeth and hatefully said, "For you, you don't care what other people turn you into, you can always admire and enjoy yourself."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed; a big hearty laugh.

At that moment, the obedient dog walked in, wagging its tail, followed by the filial son who came to kowtow and pay his respect.

Lu Xiaofeng was even more cheerful; he said with a laugh, "You are all very good today, I'll take you to 'San Liu Jiu' [lit. 369] to eat ham, dried bean curd and some steamed meat buns."

San Liu Jiu's steamed meat buns were dainty and delicate, one bamboo basket contained twenty buns, each bun was bite-size. Eating three or five baskets could not be considered too much.

Even Old Master Lu's dog ate three baskets; but his housekeeper and housemaid could only stand in the back, waiting.

Becoming high-ranking officials in the Capital, these Big Masters always followed a bit stricter protocol compared to other people.

The restaurant waiter was standing on the side, watching; he shook his head and then using a half-baked Suzhou's 'officialese' accent he tried to strike a conversation, "Looks like becoming a dog in Da Laoye's [big old master] home is luckier than most people."

Lu Xiaofeng was picking his teeth using the silver toothpick that he brought along; he made loud clicking noise with his tongue. Suddenly he said, "Since you like the dog, why don't you take it out for a walk, let it do its business. When you are back, Laoye [master] will give you a reward."

The waiter hesitated. He looked at the housekeeper and housemaid, "Aren't these master housekeepers not coming?"

"He does not like the dog," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Hence the dog likes to bite him."

The waiter was scared, "Does this master dog like to bite other people?"

Lu Xiaofeng snorted, "Even if others want it to bite them, it may not necessarily be eager to open its mouth."

Old Master's wife also offered her opinion, "Although this dog of ours does not bite people, it does not like to gnaw on bones either; it only loves to eat a bit of sh1t. You can at most let it lick a little bit, but you must never let it eat it, otherwise it will have an upset stomach."

The waiter could only force a laugh while pulling the dog's leather leash, and gently and cautiously took this 'master dog' out for a walk.

The housekeeper looked at the housemaid, the housemaid looked at the filial son, the filial son looked at the Old Madame, the Old Madame smiled and said, "Don't you worry, your Old Man's dog is a precious, obedient dog, it won't run away. Besides, even if it wants to run away, it cannot."

"Why?" the filial son could not help asking.

"Because you are going out with him," the Old Madame said, "When it goes poo, you are going to wait on the side."

Cousin was indeed very obedient. He simply stood up and left.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "Looks like our son is indeed a filial son," he said with a smile.

Lu Xiaofeng had a shortcoming: every day after breakfast, he seemed to have to go to the bathroom. He drank too much wine, hence his stomach was not too well.

Although the Old Madame was a jumbo-size vinegar jar [see Chapter 11], and she could watch other people like a hawk, but when the Old Master was going to the bathroom, she could not stare at him.

But if a dog wanted to watch someone, it did not have too much of a scruple. It doesn't matter if you are going to the bathroom or not, the dog can always follow you.

Therefore, every time Lu Xiaofeng wanted to go to the bathroom, Canine Master would follow him while wagging his tail.

Today was no exception.

As soon as Lu Xiaofeng squatted down, Canine Master immediately said in low voice, "That waiter is definitely not a real waiter."

There was no response. Practically Lu Xiaofeng was ignoring him.

Canine Master continued, "His qinggong must be very high, I can hear it from his steps."

Still no response.

Just like most people, when he was going to the bathroom, Lu Xiaofeng liked to concentrate, he liked to focus his attention on the task at hands.

Canine Master continued, "Moreover, I can tell than he is an expert in disguise, so much so that his skill is higher than mine."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly said, "Do you know what you are? You are a demon."

Canine Master was startled, "A demon?"

"A dog who can speak human language, what is it if not a demon?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"But ..." Canine Master started.

But Lu Xiaofeng did not let him continue, "Do you know how people deal with a demon?" he asked.

Canine Master shook his head.

Lu Xiaofeng coldly said, "If not burning you to death, then they will beat you to death."

Canine Master did not dare to utter even a single word; he obediently left with his tail between his legs.

Finally Lu Xiaofeng was able to enjoy a moment of peace. To him, if a man can enjoy a moment of peace, even if that means he had to sit on a chamber pot, then it was already a pleasure in life. Not only that, it was a pleasure that was hard to come by, because he suddenly had a wife who watched over him constantly.

When he went out, he discovered that Liu Qingqing was already outside, waiting for him; worse yet, it seemed like she had been waiting for a long time, because there was a big pile of fava bean shells on the floor.

Lu Xiaofeng could not resist asking, "You love to see a man going to the bathroom? Or you love to smell the stench in here?"

Liu Qingqing said, "I was just a little suspicious, that's all."

"Suspicious about what?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Suspicious that you did not really go to the bathroom, but was simply trying to avoid me, while whispering sweet nothings with your dog friend," Liu Qingqing replied.

"Hence you sat out here to listen if I am really going to the bathroom," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Liu Qingqing laughed. "Now I know," she said, "That kind of noise is really not pleasant to the ears."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. With a strained smile he said, "Fortunately he is a male dog; if he were a female dog, what would happen then?"

Liu Qingqing flatly said, "If he were a female dog, he would have been dead by now."

The sixth day of the fourth month, cloudy, but no rain.

An entry in Housekeeper's journal: "Light breakfast at the Kui Yuan Guan of the eastern city. During the meal, there was someone else who took the dog for a walk; from start to finish it took about half a sichen [i.e. about an hour, 1 sichen is 2 hours]."

"The waiter who took the dog for a walk is surnamed Wang, locally born and bred here, has been a waiter for fourteen years, has a wife, a son and a daughter."

"This man has been investigated, but no suspicion is found on him."

Naturally this journal would be handed over to Old Sabre Honcho later. But Hai Qikuo had an objection, "Can't do, you must not write it like that."

"Why not?" Housekeeper asked.

Hai Qikuo said, "We shouldn't have taken this dog along, we shouldn't have let him get someone else to walk the dog even more; when Old Sabre Honcho read this, he will think there are problems."

"What do you think we should do?" Housekeeper asked.

With a cold laugh Hai Qikuo said, "If the dog is a dead dog, it will be like the (grain) rice has been cooked into (cooked) rice; what can he do to me?"

Housekeeper exhaled and said, "I just don't know how long will it be before the living dog turns into a dead dog."

"Soon," Hai Qikuo said.

"Are you going to take the dog out for a walk tomorrow?" Housekeeper asked.

Hai Qikuo sighed and said, "It looks like this is the first time in my life I have to do such thing."

"Won't it be the last as well?" Housekeeper asked.

"That's right," Hai Qikuo said, "Absolutely correct."

The seventh day of the fourth month, clear.

Hai Qikuo had already taken the dog out very far, as if he had no intention of coming back.

Cousin was following behind, he couldn't help asking, "Since when do you like walking like this?"

"Just now," Hai Qikuo replied.

"And where are you heading now?" Cousin asked.

"Outside the city wall," Hai Qikuo replied.

"What are you going to do outside the city wall?" Cousin asked.

Hai Qikuo replied, "Although a dead dog on the street is a very common thing, but if suddenly a man appeared from inside the dog's skin, it will be a different thing altogether."

Cousin agreed, "Of course something like this must not be seen by anybody else."

"Hence we are going out of the city wall," Hai Qikuo said.

He held on the dog's leash tightly; Cousin also held on to the sword hilt under his clothes. Not only this dog understood human language, he was

also a secret projectile expert. If the dog did not die under human hands, but the human died under the dog's hands, it would really be a joke.

Who would have thought that the dog did not show any reaction at all?

"Do you know what kind of trick this dog has in his belly?" Cousin asked.

"I only know that there seems to be no one else around here," Hai Qikuo replied.

"Not even half a shadow," Cousin agreed.

Hai Qikuo suddenly stopped. Looking at the dog, he sighed and said, "Quan Xiong, Quan Xiong [lit. 'brother dog'], we have eaten together, we have drunk together; in short, we are friends. If you have any last wish, there is no harm in telling us. As long as we can do it, we will surely do it for you."

The dog wagged its tail. "Woof, woof!" it barked.

"Even if you wag your tail, it's useless, we still have to kill you," Hai Qikuo said.

Cousin added, "But we can guarantee that we won't sell you to the dog meat shop."

Hai Qikuo sighed again. His vinegar-bowl size fist struck down. As soon as the fist hit the dog's head, a sound of breaking bones was heard.

The dog howled, unexpectedly it was still able to stand. Cousin's sword quickly pierced its neck.

Blood splashed, Hai Qikuo leaped high to evade; by the time he landed on the ground, the living dog has turned into a dead dog.

Hai Qikuo heaved a sigh; he said with a laugh, "Apparently killing dog is much easier than killing people."

But Cousin's countenance sank; suddenly he said with a cold laugh, "I am afraid we really killed a dog."

Hai Qikuo was stunned; immediately he stooped down, trying to peel the dog's skin to take a look.

Inside the dog's skin, it was still a dog; this dog was not Canine Master.

Hai Qikuo's countenance changed. "I clearly saw it," he said.

"Saw what?" Cousin asked.

"I saw Canine Master got into a dog skin like this, and became a dog like this," Hai Qikuo replied.

"There are many kinds of dogs," Cousin coldly said, "Dogs of the same breed look more or less alike."

"Where is Canine Master then?" Hai Qikuo asked, "Where did this dog come from?"

"Why don't you go ask Lu Xiaofeng?" Cousin said.

Unexpectedly there was someone waiting outside the lavatory. Lu Xiaofeng has just reached the door, he has not even tied his belt yet, and he had already seen Hai Qikuo.

Hai Qikuo's appearance was like someone who could not hold on anymore, perhaps a piece of sh1t was already falling into the crouch of his pants.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and mumbled to himself, "Why is it that each time I go poo there is someone waiting in line outside? Could it be that everybody ate the wrong medicine and are having diarrhea?"

Hai Qikuo clenched his teeth and said hatefully, "I did not take the wrong medicine, just killed the wrong person."

Lu Xiaofeng appeared shocked. "Whom did you kill?" he asked.

"I killed a dog," Hai Qikuo said.

"Wait, did you kill a person? Or a dog?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Hai Qikuo replied, "The dog I killed was supposed to be a person; who

would have thought that it was a real dog? There was nobody inside the dog skin."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. He said, "Dog is dog, inside the dog skin there is naturally dog meat, dog bones; naturally, there is no person!"

He sighed again while patting Hai Qikuo's shoulder, "You must be too tired lately. If you don't take a good rest, you might really go crazy."

Hai Qikuo looked like he really was going to go crazy from rage. "Where is Canine Master?" he suddenly roared.

Lu Xiaofeng was indifferent. "He is not my son, nor is he my housekeeper; how do I know where he is?"

"But the one insisted to bring him down the mountain was you," Hai Qikuo said.

"I just wanted to bring a dog down the mountain," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I never said I wanted to bring Canine Master."

He patted Hai Qikuo's shoulder again and said with a laugh, "Now, although you killed my dog, I don't want you to pay it with your life at all. No matter what, a good housekeeper is a lot more useful than a dog. Besides, I can't bear to have Housemaid become a widow."

Hai Qikuo was so angry that he could not say anything.

Finally Lu Xiaofeng was able to tie his belt. He started to walk away leisurely, but after only a few steps he looked back and said with a laugh, "You must report this matter to Old Sabre Honcho, I am sure he will find it very interesting. Maybe he will reward you heavily with something."

There was a hint of malicious intention in his laughter, "Can you think of what he is going to reward you?"

Hai Qikuo could. No matter what it was, it would be something very, very heavy. Could it be a very heavy punch? Or perhaps a very heavy chop?

Hai Qikuo suddenly laughed aloud. "I finally got it," he said.

"You got what?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Hai Qikuo said, "Since the one I killed was a dog, the one died was also a dog. It doesn't matter what kind of dog, in the end it is a dead dog now."

He winked, and then said with a smile, "Even dead people are all the same, much less dogs?"

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed heartily, "Looks like this fellow really gets it," he said.

The eighth day of the fourth month. It was cloudy with occasional shower.

The entry in Housekeeper's journal was very succinct, "Traveled four hundred li [1 li is approx. 1/2km], the dog died suddenly."

The ninth of the fourth month. Overcast.

No rain, only dark clouds. Thick layers of cloud hung low overhead, the sky turned dark fairly early.

"How did we get here?"

"Because the driver was afraid of getting into the lodging too late, so he took a shortcut."

"This is a shortcut?"

"Should have been. But now ..." Housekeeper sighed, and then with a bitter smile he continued, "Now it looks like we are lost."

It was dinnertime. They should have been eating, they should have been washing their face, rinsing their mouth, putting on clean clothes, and sitting under the bright light of the inn, eating some snacks and cold plate.

Yet the fact was that they have lost and were in an unfamiliar place.

"I am hungry, hungry as hell." Liu Qingqing was clearly not a woman who was accustomed to hardship. "I must eat something, my stomach

does not feel well."

"If you really want to eat something, just eat some grass like a sheep."

Liu Qingqing frowned, "Isn't there anything to eat in the carriage?"

"Not only there is nothing to eat, we don't even have anything to drink."

"So what do we do?"

"Only one thing."

"What is it?"

"Go hungry."

Liu Qingqing suddenly pushed the door open and jumped down the carriage, "I don't believe there is nothing else we could do; I am going looking."

"What are you looking for?"

"No matter what kind of place this is, there must be people around, there must be a house nearby." Liu Qingqing sounded very sure, but in her heart she was actually not sure at all.

But she was willing to look.

Because she could not endure hardship, she could not go hungry.

It doesn't matter what you are looking for, only those who are willing to look will find it.

There are a lot of things like this in the world – the first person to invent a vehicle must be someone who was disinclined to walk. Exactly because people did not want to endure hardships that humanity has made some progress.

She was willing to look, hence she found it.

Just beyond the col down the hill, unexpectedly there was really a house. A very big house.

In fact, no matter where you are, it would be difficult to find such a big house like this.

In the dark, the slopes of the roof looked like layers upon layers of dark cloud being piled up together. The main gate was expansive, so wide that at least six horses could enter in side-by-side.

But the vermillion paint on the door was peeling off, and the door was shut. The strangest thing was, such a big house, but there was no light in sight.

It is often said that sometimes a haunted house will appear in an

uninhabited wilderness. Could it be that this place is a haunted house?

“Even if this is really a haunted house, I still want to take a look inside.”
Liu Qingqing was afraid of hunger, she was not afraid of ghosts.

She was already knocking on the door. The copper ring door-knocker was more resounding than a gong, yet there was no response from the inside at all.

She was about to give up, but the door suddenly opened. It was opened just a slit, hence a slit of lantern light shone out. A man was standing in the dark, with his back toward the light. He was staring at her with cold eyes.

Although the lantern light was dim, it was glaring to her eyes. By the time her eyes had adjusted, she looked at the man, and instantly did not dare to look the second time.

This man simply did not look like a human, but he did not look like a ghost either. If we say that he was a human, he must be a mud-man. If we say that he was a ghost, then he was a ghost that was formed of clay.

From top to bottom his body was covered in mud; his face, his nose, his eyebrows, even his mouth looked like it was stuffed with mud.

Luckily he could laugh.

Looking at Liu Qingqing's expression, he suddenly roared in laughter; he laughed so hard that the dried mud on his face flaked off and 'plop,

plop', it fell to the ground.

Whether he was a human or a ghost, as long as he was able to laugh, he would not look too scary anymore.

Finally Liu Qingqing put on a brave face and with a forced laugh she said, "We are lost ..."

She only said one sentence, the man already cut her off, "I know you are lost; otherwise, how could you get to this ghost place?"

His laughter was even more cheerful, "But Old Lady, you need not be afraid, although this place is a ghost place, I am not a ghost; not only I am a human, I am a good human."

Liu Qingqing could not resist asking, "If you are a good human, how come there are so much mud on you?"

The man replied, "Anybody who dug earthworms for several days would have so much mud on him."

Liu Qingqing was stunned, "You dig earthworms?" she asked.

The man nodded. He said, "I have already dug 783 big earthworms."

Liu Qingqing was even more shocked, "What are you going to do with so many worms?" she asked.

"That many worms is still not enough," the man replied, "I still need to dig 713 to have enough."

"Why?" Liu Qingqing asked.

The man replied, "Because I made a bet with someone, whoever loses will have to dig 1500 earthworms, mustn't be less even one."

"And you lost?" Liu Qingqing asked.

The man sighed and said, "Although I haven't lost yet, I know that I will lose for sure."

Liu Qingqing looked at him; she stared straight into his eyes, "This kind of bet is very unusual, the person who made a bet with you must be a strange man."

"Not only he is a strange man," the man said, "He is also an a\$\$h01e [orig. muddled egg]. Not only he is an a\$\$h01e, he is a big a\$\$h01e."

Lu Xiaofeng has been standing afar off, suddenly he interrupted, "Not only he is a big a\$\$h01e, he is an especially big a\$\$h01e."

The man readily agreed, "Totally correct."

"If he is an a\$\$h01e," Lu Xiaofeng continued, "What about you?"

The man sighed. "It seems like I am too," he admitted.

Lu Xiaofeng was going to say something else, Liu Qingqing was already screaming, "You are not an asshole, you are a good man. I know you will definitely let us stay for the night here."

"You want to stay overnight in this place?" the man asked in disbelief.

"Uh huh," Liu Qingqing said.

"You really want to?" the man asked again.

"Of course I really want to," Liu Qingqing replied.

The man looked at her in shock, as if it was more shocking than seeing someone digging earthworms from the dirt.

Liu Qingqing could not help asking, "We are lost, there are no other houses around here, we want to stay here for the night, what is so strange about that?"

The man nodded, and then he shook his head, finally he muttered under his breath, "Not strange, not strange at all."

Although his mouth said 'not strange', his expression looked very strange indeed.

Liu Qingqing could not help but ask, "Is this place haunted?"

"No, it's not," the man replied, "Not a single ghost in here."

"In that case, would you let us stay one night in here?" Liu Qingqing asked.

The man chuckled. He said, "As long as you really want to, you can stay here as long as you wish."

He turned around and walked into the gloomy and desolate courtyard, while still mumbling to himself, as if he was saying, "I am just afraid that you might not even stay for half a sichen, because so far there has never been anybody who can stay here for long."

Across the courtyard there were seven rooms, and there were quite a few lanterns in each room.

Surprisingly, there was still oil in the lanterns.

And surprisingly, the man lighted every single one of the lanterns in the room. And then he sighed in contentment, "No matter what kind of ghost place, as long as there are lighted lanterns around, it will look a lot better."

Actually, the place did not look too bad. Although there was thick layer of dust accumulated everywhere, the beautiful and expensive looking decoration and furnishing did not look worn-out at all. In fact, it could be said that they were of the contemporary style.

Liu Qingqing tried to sound out the man, "Did you say that there has never been anybody who are able to stay here?"

The man admitted.

It was only natural that Liu Qingqing probed further, "Why?"

The man replied, "Because there is something here that no one has ever been able to stand."

"What is it?" Liu Qingqing asked, "And where is it?"

The man pointed with his finger, "Right there."

He was pointing to a crystal case, which was on the sacrificial table right in the middle of the main hall.

The crystal was polished and ground that it was extremely thin, it was almost completely transparent. Inside the case there was something that looked like a withered flower petal.

"What flower is that?"

"That's not flower; it's not anything you can think of."

"What is it then?"

"It's a human eyeball."

Liu Qingqing's eyes grew big, but the pupil of her eyes shrank; she could not help taking two steps back in fright.

"Whose eyeball?"

"A woman's, a very famous woman. This woman's most famous feature was precisely her eyes."

"Why was it famous?"

"Because she was the Divine Eyes. It was said that not only she could do embroidery in the dark, she could even hit a mosquito's head with a needle from thirty steps away."

"Are you talking about the Divine Eyes, Third Mistress Shen?"

"Other than she, who else?"

"Who put her eyeball in here?"

"Other than her husband, who else?"

"Wasn't her husband the Jade Forest Swordsman Ye Lingfeng?"

"That's right. There is also only one Ye Lingfeng in Jianghu. Fortunately there is only one."

Liu Qingqing clasped her hands together tightly, the palm of her hands were wet.

Did she know the web of gratitude and grudges between Ye Lingfeng and Old Sabre Honcho? They reached this place, was it a coincidence? Or some unseen people secretly arranged all these?

The man who dug earthworms had his face completely covered with mud, nobody could see the expression on his face.

But his voice was rather hoarse, as he continued his narration, "There are a total of ninety-three rooms in this building, each room has a crystal case just like this."

Each room had one? Liu Qingqing immediately burst into the second room. Sure enough, she saw an identical crystal case in it.

But the object inside the case was a withered ear.

Like a specter the man who dug earthworms followed behind her, "When Third Mistress Shen died, Ye Lingfeng cut her off into ninety-three pieces ..."

Liu Qingqing could not help crying out, "Why did he do that?"

The man who dug earthworms sighed and said, "Because he loved her too much, he wanted to see her all the time, no matter where he was or where he went, he wanted to see her. Even though he could only see one eye, one ear, he was satisfied."

Liu Qingqing bit her lower lip, she nearly could not refrain from throwing up.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly asked, "I heard that Third Mistress Shen's cousin [orig. maternal older male cousin] is Wudang's famous swordsman Wooden Taoist."

The man who dug earthworms nodded.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "I heard that the two of them got married, it was Wooden Taoist who became the matchmaker."

"That's right," the man who dug earthworms said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Ye Lingfeng did that, wasn't he afraid Wooden Taoist would deal with him?"

The man who dug earthworms said, "By the time Wooden Taoist wanted to deal with him, it was already too late. In less than three months after Third Mistress Shen died, he went insane, he crashed his own head against the rock garden at the back of his house, his head was thoroughly mashed."

"If someone had his head thoroughly mashed, naturally nobody would

recognize his true identity, hence nobody can prove whether the man who died was really him."

All along Liu Qingqing was holding her breath, finally she started breathing again, and immediately asked, "After he died, why didn't anybody move these cases away?"

The man who dug earthworms said, "Because the people who wanted to move these cases away are now lying inside cases."

"What kind of cases?" Liu Qingqing asked.

The man who dug earthworms replied, "Something long, made of wood, usually designed to contain dead people. Most people, when they are dead, will be lying in a case like these."

Liu Qingqing forced a chuckle and then said, "At least it is much better than being inside a crystal case like this."

The man who dug earthworms said, "Unfortunately, not too much."

"Why?" Liu Qingqing asked.

The man who dug earthworms replied, "Because being strangled alive by a pair of ghost's hands did not feel pleasant at all."

Liu Qingqing said, "But you said it yourself a moment ago that there is not a single ghost in this place."

The man who dug earthworms said, "Indeed there is not a single ghost in here, but this place has at least forty-nine ghosts. Moreover, they all are ghosts who died of injustice."

"How many people were here originally?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"Forty-nine," the earthworm-digger man replied.

"And now all these people have died?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"If there is an eyeball inside a crystal case staring at you every day, can you stand it?" the man who dug earthworms asked.

"I can't stand it," Liu Qingqing replied, "I will definitely go crazy."

"If you can't stand it, others won't be able to stand it either," the earthworm-digger said, "Therefore, everybody wanted to remove these cases. However, no matter who, as soon as he touched the case, his tongue would stuck out half a chi [Chinese foot, approx. 1 foot or 1/3 of a meter] long, and instantly his breathing would stop. Just like this."

He stuck his own tongue out, and it was very long indeed. His face was completely covered in black mud, but his tongue was as red as blood. Only someone who was strangled to death would have that kind of appearance.

Liu Qingqing looked away immediately, she did not dare to even take a

glance; yet she still could not resist asking, "What about you? Have you tried to move these cases?"

The man who dug earthworms shook his head, and then nodded. His tongue was still stuck out, basically he could not speak.

"All the people in here have died," Liu Qingqing said, "How come you are still alive? You are not ghost, are you?"

The earthworm-digger suddenly took out his hand from his bosom, and tossed something full of blackish-green stuffs toward Liu Qingqing. These stuffs were surprisingly alive, they were warm, soft, and slippery. They were live earthworms!

Liu Qingqing screamed; she was so scared that she almost fainted.

She was actually not a kind of woman who get easily scared, but these moist, soft and slippery earthworms were just too much.

By the time she was dodging these worms, the earthworm-digger has already disappeared. The light flickered a couple of times, all the lanterns in the room suddenly went out.

She turned around. Lu Xiaofeng and the others were gone, she was all alone.

Fortunately, there was still light in the room next door. She rushed over, but the lantern in that room suddenly went out as well.

Although there were still lights in the rooms ahead, but by the time she rushed over, the lanterns went out one after another. In this way, all seven rooms she saw earlier had turned into complete darkness. Suddenly she could not see anything, not even the hand she stretched out in front of her eyes.

-- Was the eyeball in the crystal case still staring at her?

-- How about those forty-nine people who died in injustice, whose tongues were sticking out? Were they also staring at her in the dark?

She could not see them.

She was not the Divine Eyes.

-- That damned Lu Xiaofeng, where did he die?

"Hey old man, dead old man, the old man surnamed Lu, aren't you going to come out?" She shouted, but there was no response.

There was not a single response; Housekeeper, Hook, Cousin, wonder where they went?

-- Have they all been strangled to death by a pair of invisible ghost hands?

-- Could it be that this was all a deathly trap?

She wanted to rush out, but three times she tried, she always hit the wall. Her entire body was drenched in cold sweats.

Her last attempt resulted in she tripped and fell down. Her legs went weak, she nearly did not have any strength to crawl back up.

Suddenly a hand was reaching out to her in the dark, pulling her up.

-- Was it Lu Xiaofeng?

It wasn't.

Ice-cold and dry hand, with nails at least a cun [1 cun is approx. 1 inch] long.

She couldn't help screaming at the top of her lungs, "Who are you?"

"You can't see me, but I can see you," a voice was sort of laughing in the dark, "I am the Divine Eyes."

It was a female voice.

Was this hand reaching out from inside a crystal case?

The laughter continued, she tried with all her strength to grope forward. She pounced an empty space.

That ice-cold and dry hand reached out from behind her and caressed her neck lightly.

She really was not the kind of woman who got scared so easily to the point of passing out, but right now she fainted for real.

The tenth day of the fourth month. Clear.

When Liu Qingqing woke up, the sun was shining outside her window.

The window was moving, the trees outside were also moving – as if they were flying backwards.

She rubbed her eyes, and suddenly found herself to be in the carriage again. Lu Xiaofeng was sitting opposite her, he was staring at her with a wide grin on his face.

She bit her lower lip. It hurt, very much.

It was not a dream.

She sprang up, and glowered at Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled. "Morning," he said.

"Morning?" Liu Qingqing said, "Is it morning?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "Actually, it can't be considered morning anymore. Last night you slept like a dead person."

Liu Qingqing clenched her teeth, "What about you?" she asked.

"I also slept a bit," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Liu Qingqing suddenly jumped up and pounced; she pounced on him, and strangled him on the neck, while saying ferociously, "Speak up, speak up quickly, what is this all about?"

"What it's all about?" Lu Xiaofeng asked back.

"About last night," Liu Qingqing replied.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "I was about to ask you," he said, "What's the matter with you? Why did you bump your head against the wall without any good reason and passed out just like that?"

Liu Qingqing shrieked; she said, "I am not crazy, why would I want to bump my own head against the wall?"

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "If you yourself did not know, how in the world would I know?"

"I ask you," Liu Qingqing said, "Those lanterns in the room, how could they go out together like that?"

"The lanterns ran out of oil," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Naturally they went out."

"What about that man who dug earthworms?" Liu Qingqing asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "When the lanterns went out, naturally he wanted to find more oil."

"Did he find some?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"It was precisely because he found some oil that we were able to find you," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Is he really a human?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"Not only he is a human, he is also a good human," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Not only he found oil for the lanterns, he cooked a big pot of rice porridge, each of us had eaten several bowls."

Liu Qingqing stared blankly; she stared blankly for half a day before asking, "When the lanterns went out, where were you?"

"In the back," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"I was at the front," Liu Qingqing said, "What did you do in the back?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "You were at the front, why must we also be at the front? We are not your shadow [orig. bum beetle], why can't we go to the back to look around?"

Liu Qingqing suddenly shouted, "Housekeeper, Housemaid, Good Son, all of you, come in!"

The carriage stopped, all the people she called came over. She asked them the same question she had just asked Lu Xiaofeng, but their answer was the same. They did not understand why she bumped her head against the wall with no good reason and passed out.

Liu Qingqing was so mad that she almost passed out again, yet she could not resist asking, "Didn't you all see the hand?"

"What hand?" Housekeeper asked.

"The ghost hand strangling my neck," Liu Qingqing said.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly laughed. "Yes, I saw that," he said.

His smile was very mysterious, "Not only I saw it, I brought it with me," he said.

Immediately Liu Qingqing's eyes brightened, "Where is it?" she asked.

"Right here," Lu Xiaofeng said.

He smiled, and from his pocket he took a hanging curtains cord, on the cord there were several cun-long hooks, the hooks looked like fingernails. "Aren't these the ghost hand that wrapped around your neck?"

Liu Qingqing was speechless.

Hai Qikuo suddenly roared in laughter and said, "I can't believe the Jiangnan Heroine with grand reputation Liu Qingqing could be scared and fainted by a string of window curtain cord."

"Actually, you should have thought about it," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Why?" Hai Qikuo asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Because she is a woman, plus her age cannot be considered young."

He sighed, and then with a wry smile said, "If a woman reaches her age, it is often very difficult not to be paranoid."

The eleventh day of the fourth month. Clear.

Dusk.

From yesterday morning until now, the number of sentences Liu Qingqing spoke put together was still less than what she usually said during one mealtime.

Her countenance was also very unsightly. It was unclear whether it was because she was still scared and her heart has not calmed down, or whether it was because the D-day was getting closer?

At the moment they were only half a day away from Mount Wudang. Old Sabre Honcho did not leave any message, nor did he give them any final instructions. Therefore, not only she changed, others were a bit nervous and tense as well.

Nobody knew what their chance of success would be in this operation.

Shi He (sic), Tie Jian, Wang Shidai, Gao Xingkong ... these people could be considered the elites, the very top of Wulin experts. [Translator's note: I could have sworn earlier it was Shi Yan ...]

Moreover, in addition to those seven people, nobody knew for sure how many more martial art experts have arrived on Mount Wudang.

"Do you think Ximen Chuixue would come too?"

"He wouldn't."

"Why?"

"Because the one he is looking for is Lu Xiaofeng, he can't possibly think that Lu Xiaofeng is on Mount Wudang."

Naturally the one who said those words was Lu Xiaofeng.

Perhaps the reason he said it was because in his heart he himself was hoping it was so.

Evenings was the time when the city was most bustling with activities. Their carriage was passing through the city center.

"Even if Ximen Chuixue is not coming, Wooden Taoist will definitely be there. Although for the last several years he has almost completely retired, but in such an important event of Sect Leader inauguration like this, he can't possibly not get involved."

"Of course."

"If Wooden Taoist is here, then presumably Ancient Pine Hermit will also be here. Just these two, it's already not easy to deal with."

"I think Old Sabre Honcho must have had a way to deal with them, otherwise, why didn't he include these two in the list?"

"No matter what, we shouldn't even think about this matter now," Lu Xiaofeng opened his mouth.

"What should we think about then?"

"We should think about where are we going to eat?"

At the moment Cousin, Housekeeper, Hai Qikuo were all riding in the

carriage. They seemed to be about to open their mouth, but suddenly all of them shut up at the same time. Six eyes were looking at the doorway of a restaurant across the street.

The carriage was traveling very slowly, by the time they passed, there were three people entering the restaurant.

One man had red face and bald head, his gaze was sharp like an eagle's. Another man was as tall like a bamboo pole, and he was as thin as a bamboo pole. He swayed to the left and wobbled to the right, as if a gust of wind would be able to knock him down.

The third person was holding on these two people's shoulders, as if he was drunk; yet he dressed as a Taoist priest whose hair was completely white.

Lu Xiaofeng knew all these three; Cousin, Housekeeper and Hai Qikuo also knew them.

The one with the eagle's eyes was Ying Yan Laoqi [lit. Hawk Eye the seventh], the Zongpiaobazi [head honcho/big boss] of the Twelve-Dock Alliance.

The one that looked like his walk was unsteady was actually the Yandang Mountain Lord, Gao Xingkong, whose qinggong had shaken both sides of the Yangtze River.

The old Taoist priest who looked totally drunk was the person they were just talking about, the famous senior of Wudang, Wooden Taoist.

Although Cousin's eyes were fixed on these three, in his heart he was hoping the carriage would travel a little faster.

Who would have thought that suddenly Lu Xiaofeng said, "Order the driver to stop."

Cousin jumped in fright. "Why?" he asked.

"Because we are going to eat at this restaurant," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Cousin was even more shocked, "Don't you recognize those three people?"

"I recognize them," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "But they don't recognize me."

"In case they recognize you?" Cousin asked.

"If they can recognize us right now, then when we arrived at Wudang, they will also recognize us," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Cousin pondered over it. Finally he understood what he meant, "You want to test whether they could recognize us?"

Lu Xiaofeng nonchalantly said, "In any case we need to take a risk of being recognized by them. If we are being recognized here, at least it would be much better than if we are being recognized in Wudang."

He had just finished speaking, Liu Qingqing had already knocked the carriage loudly and called out, "Stop the carriage."

Until then, everybody thought Lu Xiaofeng's plan was obviously a great idea, hence nobody raised any objection.

Because by that time they had not entered the restaurant yet.

But when they went up, it was already too late to regret. And the one who regretted his decision the most was, unexpectedly, Lu Xiaofeng.

Chapter 13 – Success is the only option

The style of this restaurant was very exquisite, the size was also very big, but the business was not so good. Although right now was dinner time, there were only three occupied tables in that spacious restaurant floor. [Translator's note: the original character indicates second floor.]

Gao Xingkong and the others' party did not consist of only three people, there was already someone waiting for them in one of the tables.

This person was tall and majestic, with grand appearance. Looking at his imposing manner and his attire, he must be a famous Wulin character.

But Lu Xiaofeng obviously did not recognize him; so much so that he did not even remember seeing this person.

The number of well-known Wulin characters that Lu Xiaofeng had never seen was indeed not many.

The table with the most number of people was also the table with most wine on it; it had men and women sitting around it.

The men were wearing gorgeous and expensive looking clothes; they must be either rich salt merchants from Yangzhou, or off-duty minor government officials in civilian clothes. The women were wearing provocative dress, they acted in loose and coquettish manner; undoubtedly they were women of windblown dust [i.e. prostitute].

The table with the least number of people only had one person sitting on it.

A man wearing white clothes, as white as snow.

Seeing this person, Lu Xiaofeng immediately felt the palm of his hands wet with cold sweats. He really never expected that he would see this person in this place. Otherwise, even if there was someone behind him with a whip in his hand, he would never want to climb up the stairs.

Yet since he was already upstairs, he could not go back down.

Lu Xiaofeng could only brace himself and find a place to sit. Liu Qingqing was looking at him with cold eyes; she could almost see the beads of perspiration behind his human-skin mask were ready to pop out.

But the man in white did not look at them, not even a sidelong glance with the corner of his eyes.

His face was ashen.

His sword was lying on the table.

He drank only water. Plain clear water. Not wine.

Evidently he was always ready to kill.

Wooden Taoist greeted him, but he acted as if he did not see him. This senior character from Wudang, whose reputation in Jianghu was resounding, seemed like an invisible character in his eyes.

The fact is: he had never considered anybody worthy to look at.

But Wooden Taoist simply laughed; he shook his head while muttering with a smile, "I don't blame him. No matter how rude he is, I simply cannot blame him."

The big and tall, majestic looking old man could not help asking, "Why?"

Wooden Taoist said, "Because he is Ximen Chuixue."

The heaven above, the earth below, the one and only Ximen Chuixue!

The heaven above, the earth below, the unique and unmatched sword!

As long as there was a sword in his hand, he had the right not to consider anybody worthy to look at!

Perhaps right now he had his eyes on Lu Xiaofeng alone.

Hatred is like some kind of exotic poisonous weeds. Although its nature is to inflict harm, it can also bring out one's full potential, so that his willpower will be more staunch, his reaction more keen.

Moreover, once this kind of sword attacked, it would not miss even a hundredth of hair width, it had the sharpness of a pair of eagle or falcon eyes.

Right now it never occurred to him that Lu Xiaofeng was right in front of him, but if Lu Xiaofeng exposed the least bit of flaw, he would never be able to escape this pair of sharp eyes.

The dishes have been served, the waiter was asking, "Master guests, which wine would you like to drink?"

Liu Qingqing immediately said, "We don't drink wine today, not the least bit of wine."

Wine could easily make people to be careless, and the smallest negligence could be fatal.

However, wine could also make people relax; it could calm people's nerve.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "Today we do not drink a bit of wine, we will drink a lot."

He smiled while patting Cousin's shoulder, "Today is my son's birthday; how can a propitious day be without any wine? Give us a jar of Green Bamboo Leaf first."

Liu Qingqing shot a malicious look at him, but he seemed to be completely oblivious; he continued with a smile, "By nature men and

wine are fated together, cautious words of a woman, we must not listen. Come, you two also sit down and accompany me several cups."

Housekeeper and Hai Qikuo had no choice but to sit down.

Listening from the side, Wooden Taoist laughed aloud while stroking his beard, "Good one! Cautious words of a woman, we must not listen; if we listen, it's superfluous and the words belong to the three great vanities[1]."

The wine was really fine, they drank it even faster. After three cups of wine entered his belly, Lu Xiaofeng's countenance naturally became brighter, his eyes were shining.

Finally he has come out of Ximen Chuixue's shadow; in fact, he seemed to forget that there was such person in that restaurant right now.

Suddenly Ximen Chuixue fixed his blade-sharp gaze on him. Wooden Taoist was also staring at him. Suddenly he raised his cup and laughed, "Friend who is fated to be with wine, could the old Taoist toast you one cup?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "Deference is no substitute for obedience, this old man [orig. 'old rotten', a humble way to refer to self] must also toast Priest three cups."

Wooden Taoist roared in laughter. Suddenly he came over; his razor-like eyes were also fixed on Lu Xiaofeng as he said, "What's your respected surname?"

"It's Xiong," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Xiong from 'bear and tiger' [xiong means bear]."

Wooden Taoist said, "Strangers coming together by chance, I should have not bothered you, but the heroic way Xiong Xiong [brother bear] drinks his wine reminds me a lot of a friend of mine."

Liu Qingqing's heart skipped a beat. Unexpectedly Lu Xiaofeng was still able to laugh very cheerfully; he said, "And where is this friend of the Priest?"

Wooden Taoist replied, "Far away at the ends of the earth, yet so close in front of my eyes."

Liu Qingqing's heart almost jumped out of her throat. Lu Xiaofeng almost spilled the wine in his cup as well.

But Wooden Taoist looked up and heaved a deep sigh; he continued, "Heaven is jealous of the braves and the talented. Although this friend of mine has gone far away to the Western Paradise (i.e. dead), but here we have wine, and we have old friends, perhaps his brave soul has returned in front of my eyes."

Liu Qingqing relaxed, Lu Xiaofeng also felt relieved, because they did not look at Ximen Chuixue.

Ximen Chuixue's pale face grew even paler that it almost appeared transparent; his hand already rested on the hilt of his sword.

Suddenly there was a clear ringing sound from outside the window, clear like the sound of dragon cry.

Only a very sharp sword being pulled out of its scabbard would make such a clear and resonant sound like a dragon cry.

The pupil of Ximen Chuixue's eyes contracted immediately.

In that same split second, there seemed to be a flash of lightning in the night sky, a streak of cold ray flashed through the window, straight toward Ximen Chuixue.

Ximen Chuixue's sword was still on the table, it was still inside the sheath. But a cup containing fresh water sitting next to the sword scabbard suddenly shot out to meet the sword ray.

'Ding!' the cup shattered into a million pieces, with millions of water droplets, like cold mist filling the air.

The sword ray disappeared, but a man appeared in the midst of the cold mist.

A man wearing black, even his face was covered in black cloth, only his eyes were visible, a pair of luminous and bright eyes.

On the table there was no more sword, the sword was already in hand.

The man in black stared at him and said, "Draw your sword."

Ximen Chuixue coldly said, "Seven people is too little, why do you have to die?"

The men in black did not understand, "Seven people?"

Ximen Chuixue said, "Under the heavens, the number people who are fit to use sword is only seven, including you. Mastering sword like this is not easy at all."

He waved his hand, "Go."

"And if I don't go I die?" the man in black said.

"Yes," Ximen Chuixue replied.

The man in black let out a cold laugh, "I am afraid the one to die is not me, it's you!"

His sword flew again.

Wooden Taoist knitted his brows, "This sword is not inferior to Ye Gucheng's Immortal Flying to the Outer Heaven; who is this man?"

Only Lu Xiaofeng knew who this man was.

He remembered the steel rope bridge bordering life and death outside the Mansion of Spirits, the sword that was able to penetrate the rock.

Shi He, the man with no face.

He was bent on deciding superiority between Ximen Chuixue and him.

Another clear ringing dragon cry sound, Ximen Chuixue's sword was out of its sheath.

Nobody could describe the changes and the speed of these two swords.

Nobody could describe the battle between these two men.

Sword aura criss-crossing the air, all cups, bowls and plates in the restaurant were shattered, the sword wind split the air, forcing everybody present to hold their breath.

Surprisingly the countenance of the four richly dressed old men did not change, while the women accompanying them scrambled away like flying orioles, scattering swallows; their heavily made-up faces turned deathly pale.

Suddenly a sword ray flew up and struck down from the sky, the man in black slanted his body sideways to evade, but he happened to fall onto the old men's table.

Ximen Chuixue's sword continued striking down from above, the man in black was completely enveloped by the sword.

He had lost the crucial momentum, while there was no way to retreat.

Who would have thought that right at that moment the restaurant floor suddenly gave up?

-- The table fell down, the man in black fell down along with the table, the four richly dressed old men, who were sitting motionless around the table, also fell down.

A large gaping hole suddenly appeared on the restaurant floor. It was like the earth suddenly split up,

Ximen Chuixue's sword flitted past above the hole, clearly he had never anticipated this change.

He was thinking of going down the hole to pursue, who would have thought that this piece of floor suddenly flew back up. 'Crack!' it just happened to restore the hole on the floor.

The table was still standing on this piece of floor, the four richly dressed old men were still sitting motionless around the table.

It appeared that these four men had used the soles of their feet to 'suck' the floor back up, but the man in black has disappeared from the table!

Sword ray has also disappeared, the sword has returned to its sheath.

Ximen Chuixue stared at them with his cold eyes, but in his cold gaze there was a hint of surprise and amazement.

Gao Xingkong, Ying Yan Laoqi, Wooden Taoist, also could not refrain from looking at each other, their smiles faded.

Obviously by now they had seen clearly that these four richly dressed old men were not salt merchants with ten thousand strings of cash in their money belt, neither were they off-duty government officials in civilian clothes, but they were martial art experts of the Wulin world whose power was unfathomably deep.

They had used their internal power to break the piece of the floor, and again used their internal energy to suck the floor back to its original place. Just how many people in Wulin had skill that has reached this level?

"Three people," Ximen Chuixue suddenly said.

The richly dressed old men looked at him calmly and quietly, waiting for him to continue.

Ximen Chuixue continued, "Those who are able to receive the forty-nine sword strike of mine, there are only three people."

That was because in just a short battle a moment ago, he had thrust his sword seven by seven, forty nine times.

Indeed he had never used forty-nine strikes to kill anybody before.

The oldest among the four richly dressed old men finally opened his mouth, "What do you say, which one is he?"

"Neither one," Ximen Chuixue said.

"Oh?" the richly dressed old man said.

Ximen Chuixue coldly said, "Those three people have already reached the status of leaders of a sect or a school, even if their blood splashes under the sword, they would never run away."

The richly dressed old man said indifferently, "In that case he must have been the fourth person."

"There is no fourth person!" Ximen Chuixue stated.

The richly dressed old man said, "Sire still have a sword in your hand, why not try it, see if we can receive forty-nine strike of Sire's sword?"

Ximen Chuixue said, "Even if you can receive it, I am afraid from the four of you, only three will be left alive."

"What about you?" the richly dressed old man asked.

Ximen Chuixue shut his mouth up.

Dealing with these four men, he really did not have any confidence.

The richly dressed old men also shut their mouths. Because dealing with Ximen Chuixue, they did not have any confidence either.

From among the four young women in fancy dress who accompanied the old men, one girl wearing emerald green colored light gown suddenly called out, "Jiujiu [maternal uncle]!" She was calling out to Lu Xiaofeng, while rushing toward him, "I finally found you, I've been looking for you everywhere."

Lu Xiaofeng was stunned.

He has always been a bachelor, an official single man; but now, not only he had a son, he had also suddenly become someone else's maternal uncle.

The young woman had already kneeled in front of him with tears streaming down her cheeks, "Uncle, don't you recognize me? I am Xiao Cui, your own sister's daughter, Xiao Cui."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly wrapped his arms around her, "How could I not recognize you? Where is your Mom?"

Xiao Cui said, "I ... I had no choice, they ... they ..." Before she could finish, she has already burst into tears again.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly sprang up and charged toward the richly dressed old men, and cursed them, "You must have bullied her; otherwise, why would she cry in such a grief-stricken manner?"

He grabbed the lapel of an old man's clothes, "You look older than I am, yet you bullied a lone and poor little girl; aren't you human? I'll stake my life against you."

He forcefully pulled the old man. Xiao Cui rushed over as well, and pulled him from behind.

Suddenly, 'crash!' the floor gave up again, the three of them fell one upon another.

Ximen Chuixue was stunned.

The ones he was about to deal with just now, they were most probably the most terrifying adversaries he had ever faced in his life.

But now all of a sudden what he was facing was no more than a big gaping hole.

He could only walk away.

When he passed Wooden Taoist's table, he suddenly paused and said, "How are you?"

Wooden Taoist was taken aback. He then laughed heartily and said, "Good, I am very good. I did not expect you to know me."

"Have you seen Lu Xiaofeng?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

Wooden Taoist stopped laughing; he sighed and said, "I haven't. Nobody has ever seen him."

Ximen Chuixue let out a cold laugh.

Wooden Taoist changed the subject, "Are you going to Wudang?" he asked.

"No," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Why?" Wooden Taoist asked.

"Because I have sword," Ximen Chuixue replied, "And Wudang has the Shedding-sword Rock."

"You never want to part with your sword?" Wooden Taoist asked.

"That's right," Ximen Chuixue replied.

The big and tall, majestic looking old man suddenly let out a cold laugh and said, "You don't dare to bring a sword up to Wudang?"

Ximen Chuixue replied coldly, "I only dare to kill. If you say another word, I am going to kill you!"

Nobody said another word.

Ximen Chuixue still had a sword in his hand.

He took his sword and headed down the stairs, and walked out without ever looking back.

Lu Xiaofeng was still bickering with the richly dressed old men, he did not even cast them a single glance.

The city center was still bright from the lanterns.

Watching him walking toward the brightly lit street, watching him walking far away, the big and tall, majestic looking old man sighed. "Is it true that there are only three people in the world who can take his forty-nine sword strikes?"

"It is," Wooden Taoist replied.

"Nobody else can take his sword?" the old man asked.

"Nobody," Wooden Taoist replied.

"Is he really unequalled under the heavens?" Gao Xingkong asked.

The big and tall old man suddenly laughed and said, "Maybe there is nobody who can take his sword, but there is somebody who can kill him!"

"Who?" Gao Xingkong and Yingyan Laoqi asked simultaneously.

The big and tall, majestic looking old man laughed. His laughter seemed very mysterious, as he said slowly, "As long as you have the patience to wait, sooner or later this person will appear."

Conflict that occurs suddenly oftentimes also ends abruptly. Others seemed to be baffled by it, although in their hearts they have their own outlook.

As soon as Ximen Chuixue left, Lu Xiaofeng also walked away. Naturally the richly-dressed old men could not stop him. Everybody acted like all these things had never happened.

Right now Lu Xiaofeng was sitting comfortably in his carriage, and the carriage was beginning to move forward.

His 'niece', who was wearing emerald green colored light gown, who looked very attractive and cute, was sitting right in front of him. Although her face still had tears that have not dried out yet, there was no grief-stricken expression on it at all; instead, there was a hint of smile in her eyes, as if she found that all these things were quite amusing.

Lu Xiaofeng himself also appeared to be amused. He suddenly asked, "So, you are my niece?"

"Uh huh," Xiao Cui said.

"Your Mama is my (younger) sister?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Uh huh," Xiao Cui said.

"And she is already dead?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Uh huh," Xiao Cui said.

"Are you going to take us to your home now?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Uh huh," Xiao Cui said.

"Who else is going to be at your house?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Cui suddenly giggled, "Some people that I am sure you'll like," she said.

"How do you know what kind of people I like?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Cui winked, "Naturally I know," she said.

"How many people are 'some'?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Not a few," Xiao Cui replied.

Her smile appeared to be very mysterious. Suddenly she stuck her head out the window and ordered the driver in loud voice, "Turn left on the alley just ahead, the third house on the right with red door."

The alley was paved with dark green flagstones, with high walls on either side; inside the wall, the red apricot trees were just blooming. The color of springs was so thick that even the high walls could not contain it.

The red third door on the right was already open, over the door quite a few pink palace-style lanterns were hung.

As soon as Xiao Cui stepped over the door, she called out loudly, "Everybody, come out quickly, our Jiujiu is here."

Before she even finished shouting, there were seventeen, eighteen girls thronged out into the courtyard. They were all young, and were as graceful and beautiful as swallows, and as noisy as sparrows, chirping 'zhi zhi cha cha' incessantly.

Which young girl did not like their (maternal) uncle? They swarmed toward Lu Xiaofeng, some pulled his hands, some tugged on his sleeves, everybody greeted him, "Jiujiu."

Lu Xiaofeng was stunned again, "They are all my nieces?"

Xiao Cui nodded. "Don't you like them?" she asked.

"I do," Lu Xiaofeng could only admit, "I like every single one of them."

Xiao Cui laughed, "I knew you'd like all of them," she said.

Turning to the girls, Xiao Cui said, "You all must be a bit more careful, our Jiujiu is good in everything, it's just that he is a bit dishonest; when he hugs you, he'd hug you so tight that you can't even breathe."

The girls' laughter became even more endearing, their chatter became even more intense. "You have been hugged by him?" "Jiujiu is not fair, you hugged her, why don't you hug me?" "I want to be hugged by Jiujiu too." "Me too, me too ..."

Lu Xiaofeng looked to the left with interest; he looked to the right with longing. In fact, he really wanted to reach to the left and embrace to the right.

Liu Qingqing was standing on the side, staring at him with cold eyes; she was thinking of a way to wake him up, to warn him so that this extreme joy would not turn into sorrow.

Who would have thought that Xiao Cui was moving faster than she? She already pulled Lu Xiaofeng's hand and had him out of the girls.

"You called us out, telling Jiujiu is here, why did you take him away now?" the girls protested loudly, "He is not just your Jiujiu, you know."

Lu Xiaofeng agreed instantly, "Since everybody here is my niece, I ought to spend time with them too."

Xiao Cui ignored him, she kept pulling him toward the promenade at the back. Only then did she let him go, and then with a barely perceptible smile, she looked at him with the corner of her eye and said, "Looks like your wild schemes are really not small, those peasant girls are all as fierce as tigers; aren't you afraid they might break your old bones?"

It was definitely not the way a niece would talk to her uncle. Who was she, actually? Why did she call Lu Xiaofeng her uncle? Why did she bring Lu Xiaofeng to this place?

Lu Xiaofeng blinked. He pretended ignorance, "So you want to be alone with me?"

Xiao Cui laughed. She giggled tenderly and said, "I don't have such big guts, just now you nearly broke all my bones. If I am alone with you, won't I be finished?"

"Sometimes I can be very gentle," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Especially when there's nobody else around."

Xiao Cui sighed theatrically, "No wonder people call you an old wolf [i.e. lecher], even with your own niece you still have ideas."

"Who said I am an old wolf?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Someone did," Xiao Cui replied.

"Who?" Lu Xiaofeng pressed.

"Naturally someone that you will also like," Xiao Cui said, "I guarantee that as soon as you see him, you will forget everybody else."

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes brightened. "Where is he now?" he asked.

Xiao Cui pointed to a door at the end of the long corridor. "He is waiting for you inside that room," she said, "He has been waiting for a long time, why don't you go quickly?"

"What about you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Cui giggled tenderly again; she said, "I am the matchmaker who just delivered the letter; it's not my job to bring anyone into the bridal chamber."

[Translator's note: it would be more exciting if Xiao Cui was saying 'she' and 'her', but one, in Chinese, 'he' and 'she' are of the same pronunciation, 'ta'; two, in my source, the original Chinese text indicate masculine 'he', not feminine 'she'. Besides, the 'bridal chamber' above can also be translated as 'secret inner room'.]

Quite a few pink palace-style lanterns were also hanging along the corridor, the lanterns were gentler and softer than the moonlight. Surprisingly none of those peasant girls came after him; unexpectedly Liu Qingqing did not come after him either.

The door was plain.

He could hear nothing from behind the door, no noise, no voices.

-- Who was waiting for him inside? Would there be a gentle and soft trap inside the door? Or would it be a deadly trap?

Lu Xiaofeng was hesitant. Xiao Cui gave him a push on his back, forcing him to enter the door.

The lantern inside was even gentler and softer, the embroidered curtain was drooping, the beads on the hanging curtain were flickering under the light. The atmosphere did indeed resemble that of a bridal chamber.

Now the groom has entered the chamber, but where was the bride?

There was no sound from behind the bed curtain either, as if there was no one in bed. But there were dishes arranged on the table, plus a pot of wine.

All the dishes were Lu Xiaofeng's favorites; the wine was also his preferred drink, the Green Bamboo Leaf.

This person was undoubtedly someone who knew him; more than that, this person understood him very well.

-- Could it be that Ye Ling had rushed ahead of him and was trying to scare him out of his wits?

-- If not Ye Ling, who else would know that he was Lu Xiaofeng?

He tried to recall all the women he could think of, but he felt it couldn't be any of them.

Therefore, he simply stopped thinking and just sat down to finish the dinner he started at the restaurant.

Suddenly there was a voice from behind the bed curtain. "There is no harm in you drinking to your heart's content today; you may also have whoever you wish to accompany you drinking. There is also no harm even if you really get drunk tonight, because we have nothing going on tomorrow."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. All those 'pink' fantasies just now had all of a sudden turned into grey ones. Ash grey plain and simple clothing, ash grey plain and simple voice.

The voice of the Old Sabre Honcho.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said with a bitter smile, "Obviously there are many ways with which you could see me, but why did you choose to give me a vain hope?"

"Because what I am going to say to you, there is absolutely no second person who can hear it," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

At last he appeared, wearing the same ash grey plain and simple clothes, the same deep-basket like bamboo rain hat, so that he looked completely out of place in this room.

Lu Xiaofeng could not even finish his drink. With a bitter laugh he said, "Aren't you going to lambast me? [orig. 'pour dogs blood on me']"

"What you did just now was indeed very dangerous," Old Sabre Honcho said, "If I did not prepare it well in advance, not only there is a good possibility that Wooden Taoist would recognize you, I am afraid Ximen Chuixue would also recognize you."

Unexpectedly, the tone of his voice was very relaxed, "But that's all in the past, on the whole it did not adversely affect our endeavor."

Lu Xiaofeng could not resist asking, "You already know about all that happened just now? Were you there?"

"I wasn't," Old Sabre Honcho said, "But I know."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed again, "The thing that I admire you the most is not because you know everything," he said.

"So what do you admire the most?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "To my surprise, you could think about getting Wu Hu, Wu Bao, those old monks to drink wine with women. Just based on this fact alone, I don't have any choice but to admire you."

Acting like big boss, drinking with prostitutes, wearing fancy clothes, were actually the habit of those senior Shaolin monks in the olden days. Other than Old Sabre Honcho, who would have thought about this?

As a result, although Ximen Chuixue and the others might think that their martial art movements were suspicious, they would never suspect that those old men were Wu Hu brothers, who had died but came back to live.

After all, in Jianghu, there were so many talented individuals in the vicissitudes of life who mastered supreme feats, yet were deeply hidden away and were never spoken of by others.

Old Sabre Honcho said nonchalantly, "Exactly because nobody suspected anything that it did not adversely affect our endeavor."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "But on the thirteenth of the fourth month, when they reappeared in Wudang ..."

"By that time they will turn into Taoist priests from faraway place who go up Mount Wudang on pilgrimage," Old Sabre Honcho said, "Nobody would pay them any attention."

"What about me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "What will I turn to that day?"

"You will be a Taoist priest, a kitchen helper who will be able to come and go the main hall to serve the distinguished guests from everywhere," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

"That will be a good assignment indeed," Lu Xiaofeng said with a wry smile.

Old Sabre Honcho said, "That day Mount Wudang will be teeming with dignitaries, absolutely no one will pay any attention to a Taoist kitchen helper."

"What is my real assignment?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Is it to deal with Shi Yan? Or Wooden Taoist?"

"Not at all," Old Sabre Honcho replied, "I have already prepared other people to deal with them."

"What about me then?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "You have me come here, it can't be for the sole purpose of serving those distinguished guests, can it?"

"Of course you have other things to do," Old Sabre Honcho said, "In fact, the success or failure of this project is resting on your shoulders."

Lu Xiaofeng could not help drinking a cup of wine. Thinking that such a heavy responsibility was resting on his shoulders, he could not help but drinking another cup of wine.

The fact was that he was a bit nervous.

Unexpectedly, Old Sabre Honcho also poured a cup of wine, which he

sipped slowly before continuing, just as slowly, "What I want you to do is not to kill, I just want you get an account book for me."

"Whose account book?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Originally it belonged to Mei Zhenren," Old Sabre Honcho replied, "After his death, it was passed on to Shi Yan."

Lu Xiaofeng did not understand, "Those magnificent Wudang Sect Leaders, did they do their own bookkeeping?"

"Every single pen stroke was personally written by them," Old Sabre Honcho confirmed.

Lu Xiaofeng tried to probe him further, "The account they are writing, naturally it's not about firewood, rice, oil and salt [fig. life's daily necessities], is it?"

"Of course not," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

Lu Xiaofeng was more curious, "What is it about then?"

To his surprise, Old Sabre Honcho raised his cup and finished the wine in one gulp before replying in gloomy tone, "Written on it are the lives of hundreds and thousands of people!"

"Who are they?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Old Sabre Honcho replied, "They are all people with status, famous people, wealthy people."

Lu Xiaofeng was more confused than ever, "What do their lives have to do with Shi Yan's account book?"

Old Sabre Honcho explained, "The things written on the account book are those people's private businesses and secrets."

"Shameful secrets?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Old Sabre Honcho nodded. "If Shi Yan ever reveals these secrets to the public, not only henceforth those people cannot stand in Jianghu anymore, I am afraid they would have their reputation swept away immediately, and they would die without burial site!"

Lu Xiaofeng heaved a very deep sigh. "Magnificent Wudang Sect Leader ought not to blackmail anybody," he said.

"They really shouldn't," Old Sabre Honcho coldly said, "Yet they clearly did."

His voice was suddenly filled with grievance and hatred, "If not because they blackmailed people by holding on to their secret, how could Shi He destroy his own face on the eve of his inauguration as Wudang Sect Leader? Gu Feiyun, Gao Tao, Liu Qingqing, Zhong Wugu and the others; how could their secrets be publicly known?"

Lu Xiaofeng could not help exhaling. "Those secrets are revealed by

Mei Zhenren and Shi Yan," he said.

Old Sabre Honcho hatefully said, "Because they failed to blackmail these people, they forced these people to their death; even if that individual has washed his heart and renewed his face, and wanted to make a fresh start, they did not want to give him the opportunity."

"But you gave them the opportunity," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I only give them one chance," Old Sabre Honcho said, "Not an opportunity."

"What's the difference?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"They want to make a fresh start, not to be dead," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

-- What's the difference between living in the Mansion of Spirits and being dead?

-- Only by destroying that account book would those people really have the opportunity of making a fresh start.

Old Sabre Honcho clenched both fists and said, "This is the main objective of this operation. We can only succeed, we must not fail!"

'Crack!' the wine cup in his hand was crushed, a streak of blood flowed out from between his fingers.

Looking at the bright red blood, Lu Xiaofeng suddenly became silent.

Because in his heart he was asking himself ...

Was Old Sabre Honcho doing the right thing?

If he was, should a righteous man help him accomplish his goal with all his might?

Wudang was a famous orthodox school, Mei Zhenren and Shi Yan have always been respected by others; he had never doubted their integrity.

But now he had to reconsider everything.

Old Sabre Honcho fixed his gaze on him, as if he was able to penetrate the deepest thought in his heart.

Actually, what was in Lu Xiaofeng's mind? Who would know?

Old Sabre Honcho slowly said, "I understand very well, if you don't really want to do something, nobody can force you. That's the reason I wanted you to know the truth of the matter."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly asked, "If your intention is to save lives, why must you kill?"

Old Sabre Honcho replied, "Those I want to kill are people who must be killed!"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Wang Shidai, Gao Xingkong, Shuishang Fei, these men have to be killed?"

With a cold laugh Old Sabre Honcho replied, "Let me ask you, just relying on Mei Zhenren and Shi Yan's disciples and trusted aides, would they be able to find out that many secrets?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Are you saying that those people you want to kill are their spies?"

Old Sabre Honcho nodded. "Because these people also have secrets, so they are also under their grip," he said.

Lu Xiaofeng also clenched his fists. Finally he asked, "So where's the book?"

"It's hidden inside the Taoist crown that Shi Yan is wearing," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart sank.

When he was young, Shi Yan of Wudang already had reputation as top swordsman in Jianghu. For the past few years he had trained hard that his skill has progressed tremendously. Although very seldom did he personally fight, it was estimated that his sword skill was already above Wooden Taoist's.

The three people Ximen Chuixue mentioned, he was undoubtedly one of those three.

The Taoist crown of Wudang Sect Leader, not only it was the symbol of Wudang's honor, it was also a priceless treasure, not to mention such a great secret was hidden inside the Taoist crown?

"I also realize that taking the crown from his head is not an easy matter at all," Old Sabre Honcho continued, "In fact, it is a lot more than 'not easy'; it is practically more difficult than ascending the heaven to pick the moon."

"Why do we have to make our move while he is wearing the crown on his head?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because it is our only chance," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

He had a very good reason, "Because other than he himself, nobody else knows where he usually hides the Taoist crown."

Lu Xiaofeng heaved a very deep sigh, "I don't think I can do it," he said.

On that day, the main hall of Wudang Monastery would be brightly lit, martial art experts would be as abundant as the cloud. Snatching the Taoist crown from Wudang Sect Leader Zhenren's head under the stares of those people, who could possibly accomplish that?

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Only you, you can do it!"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Let's say I can snatch it off, there is absolutely no way I can escape with it under those people's stare."

"Not under those people's stare," Old Sabre Honcho said, "When you are making your move, nobody will be able to see you."

"Why can't they see me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Old Sabre Honcho replied, "Because at that time all seventy-two altar lamps, inside and outside the main hall, will be extinguished at the same time."

-- When the oil in the lamp is dry, naturally the lamp will be extinguished.

"We have conducted the experiment at least 800 times," Old Sabre Honcho said, "We calculated that if the lamp only have one tael and three qian [1 tael ~ 50g, 1 qian = 1/10 of a tael], it will run out of oil right when he is announcing his successor. Our mole in Wudang will make sure that every lamp will only have one tael and three qian that night."

It was a well-thought plan indeed. "But there must be some lit candles in the main hall."

"Hua Kui is responsible for that," Old Sabre Honcho said, "Nobody can surpass his secret projectile skill 'Rain of Flowers Filling the Sky'."

Looked like the plan was almost flawless.

When the lanterns went out, the main hall would be in total darkness, everybody must be thrown into confusion, in that moment, Lu Xiaofeng would make his move to snatch the Taoist crown, Shi He would kill Shi Yan, Wu Hu brothers would kill Tie Jian, Cousin killed Priest Xiao Gu, Housekeeper killed Yingyan Laoqi, Hai Qikuo killed Shuishang Fei, Guan Tianwu killed Gao Xingkong, Du Tiexin killed Wang Shidai!

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Whether they will succeed or not, by the time the lanterns are lighted again, they will have to withdraw."

Just one strike, and then withdraw immediately!

"Same thing with you," Old Sabre Honcho continued, "If you fail to get the Taoist crown, you must leave immediately. Because in that kind of situation, there won't be any second chance for anybody."

He added an explanation, "Whether you succeed or not, you must immediately withdraw to this place. Because when the lamps are lighted, everybody will definitely try to look after their injured colleagues and fellow disciples of their schools; nobody will pay any attention if there are a few people less in the main hall, hence even less chance they will pursue you."

Not to mention at that time there would not be anybody who knew how this thing happened!

Lu Xiaofeng could not refrain from letting out a long sigh. "I admire you!" he said.

In all his life, he had been involved in many conspiracies, so many that he lost track; yet absolutely none of those plots could match this one.

This plan was almost completely foolproof.

But he still had several questions to ask, "Why don't we kill Shi Yan first, and then take the Taoist crown from his head?"

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Because we don't have any confidence that we will succeed in one strike!"

This plan simply had to succeed, failure was not an option! To plan this, he had indeed used up his life's heart and blood.

Lu Xiaofeng asked again, "If you didn't have me, who would do my job?"

"Ye Xue!" Old Sabre Honcho replied.

Lu Xiaofeng forced a laugh, "Why her?" he asked.

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Her qinggong is extremely high, plus she was born with a pair of night eyes. If Shi Yan is caught by surprise, she has at least seventy-percent chance of success."

He suddenly reached out and gripped Lu Xiaofeng's hand, "But you have ninety-percent chance of success, I can even say that your chance is more than ninety-percent. I know that you also have the skill to see clearly the downy feather of autumn[2] in the dark. Plus you have a pair of hands that is unequalled in the world!"

The way he held Lu Xiaofeng's hands was like he was holding priceless treasure.

Yet Lu Xiaofeng took this opportunity to examine Old Sabre Honcho's hands.

His hands were slim, steady, and dry. His fingers were long and powerful. If this hand was holding a suitable sword, could this hand be more terrifying than Ximen Chuixue's hand?

Who was he, actually?

If right now Lu Xiaofeng flipped his hand and grabbed the main artery in his wrist, and then snatched away the bamboo rain hat from his head, he would immediately find out who he really was.

Although the chance was indeed slim, at least he ought to try.

But Lu Xiaofeng did not try.

This had made him so angry with himself; he suddenly asked in a loud voice, "Don't you even care if she is dead or alive?"

"Who are you talking about?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

"You daughter, Ye Xue," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Even if I care, it's no use," Old Sabre Honcho said matter-of-factly, "Why bother thinking about it?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Do you know that after her death, her mother was still ..."

Immediately Old Sabre Honcho cut him off, with a blade-like stare he glowered at Lu Xiaofeng from behind the bamboo rain hat, "You can ask me to do anything for you, but from now on you must never mention this woman in front of me."

-- Why?

-- Third Mistress Shen was Ye Lingfeng's wife, but she bore him a daughter; the one she offended was Ye Lingfeng, it was not him at all.

-- Why did he hate her like that?

Lu Xiaofeng did not get it. He pondered for a long time, but he still did not get it.

Old Sabre Honcho quickly suppressed his anger, "Nothing is planned during the day tomorrow, whatever you want to do is fine. Before dawn

the day after tomorrow, I will make arrangement for you to go to Wudang."

He stood up, apparently he was ready to end the discussion, "The priest in charge of burning incense in the monastery over there is Peng Changjing, when you get to the back of the mountain, he will be able to help you with anything you need."

"And then what?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"And then you only have to wait there," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

"Waiting for the lamps to go out?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"That's right," Old Sabre Honcho replied, "Waiting for the lamps to go out."

He walked out. But then he looked back, "Starting from now, you will move alone, there is no need to make any contact with anyone, and there won't be anybody contacting you either."

With a bitter smile Lu Xiaofeng said, "Starting from now, I can't even see my wife and son."

"But you won't be lonely," Old Sabre Honcho said, "You still have a lot of nieces."

[1] Three great vanities: It is a Chinese idiom that implies a penalty for losing a bet - 3 cups of wine. There is a long story behind the words 大白

being related to wine drinking.

My rough translation: "One should not listen to the advice (or words) of a woman heedlessly; if you so much as to listen to only one word, you should punish yourself with 3 cups of wine." (Courtesy of Lu DongBin)

[2] An idiom from Mencius, meaning 'sensitive to the finest detail' or 'distinguishing right and wrong with acuity'.

Chapter 14 – Jolly Uncle

Translated by Foxs

The thirteenth of the fourth month, before dawn. The back of Mount Wudang was a complete darkness, above the midway up the mountain, there was a chill in the breeze.

Quiet night on an empty mountain, streaks of white smoke rising from below his feet; perhaps it was the cloud? Or was it the fog?

Looking to the distance, he could see the faint silhouette of the stately, majestic ancient Taoist monastery.

Right about here, the man who took him left him, "You wait here, very soon someone will come to fetch you."

Lu Xiaofeng did not ask too much, he did not want to know who this man was either. Although today was a big day, his mood was not good at all.

His nieces were indeed too many.

Luckily he did not have to wait long at all, for in the dark, someone had already asked him in low voice, "What are you doing here?"

It was their pre-arranged secret signal, the answer should be, "Looking for beans, thirteen beans."

Immediately a man appeared from the dark. Lu Xiaofeng then asked,

"Who are you?"

"Peng Changjing."

Peng Changjing really looked a bit like a bean; round, small, but his eyes were so bright, his movements were so agile. He quickly looked up and down twice, sizing Lu Xiaofeng up, and then with a straight face said, "You just drank wine!"

Of course Lu Xiaofeng just drank wine, he drank quite a bit of wine.

Peng Changjing said, "Here, you must not drink, you must not swear, you must not look at women. When walking, you must not walk too fast, when talking, you must not talk too loud."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "Here, can we fart?"

Peng Changjing's countenance sank, he said coldly, "I don't know what you do, and I don't want to know, but here, you must follow the rules."

Lu Xiaofeng stopped laughing, he could not laugh anymore.

He knew he has met a man who was hard to deal with.

Peng Changjing said, "There's one more thing you'd best remember."

"What is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Peng Changjing said, "Up the mountain, you must sleep with your head covered, you must never speak with anybody. In case anybody ask, just tell him I have you here to help."

He paused for a moment, and then added, "My Shidi [younger martial brother] Changqing is quite formidable, just in case you come across him, you must be even more careful."

"I will be very careful, I promise," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Alright," Peng Changjing said, "Come, follow me."

Not only his movements were very agile, his qinggong was quite good.

Lu Xiaofeng had no idea that a Taoist priest, the manager of the kitchen helpers, could have such a good skill.

Peng Changjing was even more surprised, because Lu Xiaofeng was able to keep up with him. No matter how fast he went, Lu Xiaofeng was able to maintain the same distance throughout the short trip.

Obviously Old Sabre Honcho did not tell Peng Changjing about Lu Xiaofeng's background. Other than Old Sabre Honcho himself, what everybody knew seemed to be not much. Therefore, even if there was one or two people failed, what they knew would not be enough to jeopardize their operation.

The day has not yet brightened, the kitchen at the back of the mountain was already bustling with activities: people rinsing rice, making a fire, washing vegetables, cooking porridge, *etc.* Everybody was working quietly, minding their own business, very few people open their mouths to talk.

Compared to his treatment to Lu Xiaofeng, this Manager Peng was actually more blunt toward other people.

Behind the pantry and the kitchen, there were two rows of wooden huts, in the room at the end of the row, there were piles of baskets full of salted white radish, which have not completely been dried in the sun. And in the corner of this room, there was a row of shabby bamboo beds.

"You may sleep here," Peng Changjing said.

Lu Xiaofeng could not resist asking, "Sleep until what time?"

"Sleep until I come to get you," Peng Changjing replied, "Anyway, there are plenty to eat in here."

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked, "Eat this salted white radish?" he asked.

"Salted white radish is also fit for human consumption," Peng Changjing coldly said.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. With a wry smile he muttered to himself, "I am afraid if I ate too much white radish I would fart a lot."

"You are free not to eat," Peng Changjing said, "Even if you are fasting for a day, you won't die of starvation."

He was ready to leave. "Is there anything else you are not clear about?" he asked.

"Just one thing," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Speak up," Peng Changjing said.

"I was just wondering," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Why didn't you change profession to be a prison warden?" As soon as he finished speaking, he lay down on the bamboo bed and covered his head with the thin, worn out blanket, no longer cared about anything, even a dead person.

'Bang!' he heard the loud noise as Peng Changjing could only vent his anger against the wooden plank door.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

Dealing with this kind of person, you can only think of a way to piss him off; as long as there is the slightest chance to make him angry, you must never pass it, it would be best if you could make him so angry that he is half-dead.

But the quilt was so stinky that it made Lu Xiaofeng half-dead first. He uncovered his head, trying to catch his breath, but the stink from the

white radish was not much better than the smell of the quilt. Perhaps only people with congested nose could sleep in here.

The first light of dawn was starting to appear on the eastern horizon, painting the paper window covering white, and then the sunlight started to illuminate the window frame.

Lu Xiaofeng stared blankly at the only window on that room. Telling him to just lie there, staring blankly at the window, waiting for the sun to go down, would be the same as asking for his life.

What's more, right now his tummy was hungry as hell. Telling him to eat salted white radish would also be the same as asking for his life.

With that many things that were asking for his life, if he were able to stay still and do nothing, then he would not be Lu Xiaofeng.

Even if what Peng Changjing told him was an imperial edict, Lu Xiaofeng did not care. Good or bad, he simply must go to the kitchen first to find something to eat.

With so many distinguish guests coming to the Mountain, there must be some mushroom soup and other fine vegetarian dishes in the kitchen. Although he would rather eat dishes with generous amounts of meat and fish, he would, on occasions, have no objection over eating vegetarian dishes.

The only objection he had was against going hungry.

In fact, he believed that everyone ought to have freedom from hunger, freedom from want.

The sun had risen very high, the people in the kitchen were ready to put porridge, vegetarian dishes and light refreshments into red-laquered food containers, to be delivered out of the kitchen.

Although breakfast food are usually a bit simpler, the vegetarian dishes were exquisitely prepared. Evidently these containers were meant to be for the distinguished guests.

Lu Xiaofeng was just thinking about how to have one food case delivered to his room so that he could enjoy it, when he suddenly heard a loud voice calling, "Hey you, come here!"

The speaker was a middle-aged Taoist priest, with a sour-looking long face like that of a horse; it looked very unattractive.

Lu Xiaofeng looked to the east, he looked to the west, he looked to the front, to the back, left and right, but he did not see anybody else. Evidently the horse-faced Taoist priest was calling him.

He had no choice but to walk over to him.

It appeared that he was not the only temporary help hired by the kitchen. The Taoist priest did not even question his background, he only wanted him to deliver the biggest food case to the Tingzhu [lit. listening to the bamboo] Courtyard, and told him to hurry up.

Lu Xiaofeng took the food container and left. He looked at the contents of the case and saw a dish of well-cooked and tender bamboo shoot in mushroom oil, a dish of flat, pointy green soy bean, a dish of marinated Shiitake mushroom, a dish of Luohan plate, plus a big bowl of savory round-grained rice congee.

These food were prepared to his taste, he really would like to eat it first and talk about it later.

But if he really did that, he would not be Lu Xiaofeng either.

The way Lu Xiaofeng worked was not totally without any sense of propriety, he really did not want to spoil the big plan.

Since the food case contained such a fine food, the guest staying at the Tingzhu Courtyard must be a particularly distinguished guest.

Right now his only problem was: he had no idea where in the world was this Tingzhu Courtyard?

He was just thinking of looking for a bit more pleasant looking person to ask for direction, but the one he saw was the most unpleasant one.

Peng Changjing was staring at him with cold eyes. Suddenly he asked in low voice, "Do you know who is staying at the Tingzhu Courtyard?"

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head.

Peng Changjing said, "It's Tie Jian of Shaolin."

Lu Xiaofeng's palms seemed to start sweating.

He knew Tie Jian; not only this old monk had a pair of keen eyes, but before leaving home [to become a monk], he was a famous detective. Not a single one of the ways of the criminal world he was not familiar with. It was said that the one he was most familiar with was precisely disguising skill. Even the most famous 'flying burglar' [i.e. burglar who gains entrance by scaling walls] in Jianghu of the olden days, the 'Man with Thousand Faces', had fallen under his hands.

Peng Changjing coldly said, "If he sees your disguise, you are done."

"Can I not go?" Lu Xiaofeng asked with a wry smile.

"Cannot," Peng Changjing replied.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because," Peng Changjing explained, "The one who sent you on this errand is precisely Song Changqing, and he already has his eyes on you."

Fortunately the Tingzhu Courtyard was really not difficult to find. According to Peng Changjing's direction, he just had to follow the gravel path, and soon he would see a verdant bamboo forest.

When he reached the path, there was someone walking ahead of him.

The blue clothes he was wearing had been washed out that it turned white, plus there were seventeen, eighteen patches sewn onto it.

He knew this man, he did not need to look at his face to recognize him.

According to the Beggar Clan's most important bylaws, the hemp cloth sack that the Beggar Clan disciples wore on their back was called the rank pouch. If you have the rank as a seven-pouch disciple, then you would carry seven pouches on your back; no more, no less. Practically this rule was more strict than the imperial court regulation concerning the distinction in ranks among the government officials.

Seven-pouch disciples were elders with specific duties, only the Bangzhu [Clan Leader] was entitled to wear nine pouches on his back.

The man walking in front of Lu Xiaofeng unexpectedly had ten pouches on his back.

Over the last several hundred years of the Beggar Clan's establishment, this was the only exception. Because this man's meritorious deed to the Beggar Clan was indeed too big, yet he flatly refused to flaunt his achievement; he even refused to be made the Clan Leader.

In order to show him respect and gratitude, every single one of the several thousands Beggar Clan disciples, from top to bottom, cut off a piece of his own pouch and sewed the pieces together to make a pouch for him, to be a symbol of his privilege and special rank.

This man was indeed Wang Shidai [lit. Wang (surname) the ten-pouch].

Lu Xiaofeng lowered his head and deliberately slowed down his pace.

This year Wang Shidai was approaching eighty, he had reached the age in Jianghu where he could not get even older; not many matters in Jianghu would be able to fool him anymore.

Lu Xiaofeng really did not wish to be seen by him, yet obviously he could not hide anymore. He seemed to also be going to the Tingzhu Courtyard; perhaps there were many of his friends already waiting for him over there, and his friends were obviously extremely important characters of the Wulin world.

Wooden Taoist, Gao Xingkong and Yingyan Laoqi were present, and then there was that big and tall, majestic looking old man – who was this man, actually? What was his rank?

There was also a middle-aged Taoist priest who dressed neatly, whose face was full of beard; it was Xiao Gu of Mount Ba.

The last person wore a plain and simple clothes, a quiet young man whose life has always been full of confidence and love for life, the friend whom Lu Xiaofeng has not seen for a long time, Hua Manlou.

Although he could not use his eyes to see, but he could use his heart to see clearly, to understand, to emphasise, to care for others.

That was the reason he was always full of life.

Every time Lu Xiaofeng saw him, there was always a burst of inexplicable warmth bubbling up in his heart.

It was not just because of their friendship, but it grew from the genuine respect from the bottom of his heart.

The Cloud Room looked refined, elegant and serene. When Lu Xiaofeng entered, they were talking about Wooden Taoist's experience at the restaurant that day.

Undoubtedly Lu Xiaofeng was very interested on this subject, hence he intentionally did everything very slowly, while trying not to show his face to these people. But they were ignoring him completely, the conversation did not pause at all.

"Ximen Chuixue was speaking the truth," Wooden Taoist's judgement has always been valued by everybody else, "The number of people who can take a round of his rapid attacks definitely can't be more than five people."

"You can't tell the background of that masked swordsman in black either?" This question was asked by Xiao Gu of Mount Ba.

Himself was a renowned expert in swordsmanship, his 'seven by seven, forty-nine hands turning-the-wind, dancing-the-willow sword' that was handed down from generation to generation, along with Wudang's 'heaven and earth [or 'yin and yang'] divine sword', and Kunlun's 'flying dragon's great nine-style', were known as The Three Great Sword Techniques of the Mysterious School.

"That man's movements were quick and skillful, a sign that he is a seasoned swordsman, his power was so deep that he did not seem to be inferior to Lao Gu in the past." [Translator's note: same character 'Gu' from Xiao Gu of Bashan; in fact, in Chinese, 'lao' and 'xiao' (old and young) are often used to denote relation, *i.e.* perhaps it was 'Old Gu' and 'Young Gu' of Mount Ba.]

Wooden Taoist's eyes showed that he was deep in thought, "The strangest thing was, he seemed to be using Wudang sword technique, but compared to Wudang sword technique, it was sharper and more sinister."

"What would you say his skill compared to yours?" This question was asked by Wang Shidai; only he could ask that kind of question.

Wooden Taoist chuckled and said, "My pair of hands has not held a sword for at least ten years."

"Aren't your hands itching?"

"When my hands itch I simply pick up chess pieces and wine cup." Wooden Taoist laughed and said, "Not only it is more relaxing and fun than holding a sword, it is also a lot safer."

"So that day you've been watching with folded arms all along."

"I could only watch with folded arms, because not only I had wine cup in my hand, I also had a wine pot in my other hand."

"Who was the friend who was fated to be with wine you mentioned earlier?"

"That man said he was a government official from the Capital who was 'announcing old age and returning home'; I say he was a bit suspicious." Yingyan Laoqi opened his mouth to join the discussion.

"Suspicious?"

"Although he was trying hard to act senile to divert other people's attention, his foot skill was by no means weak; falling down from the upstairs, unexpectedly he did not show the slightest bit of problem. Looking at his appearance, he reminded me of an old acquaintance."

On hearing this, Lu Xiaofeng's heart nearly jumped out of his throat; he immediately thought about slipping away as soon as he can.

"Who did he look like?"

"Sikong Zhaixing."

Lu Xiaofeng was relieved instantly; now he did not want to leave.

They were starting to talk about those four old men whose actions were shrouded in mystery.

"Those four men, not only their power was extremely deep, their style looked very close to each other." Wooden Taoist said with a wry smile,

“That kind of people, even one is very hard to find, but that day four of them suddenly appeared together; it’s like all of a sudden they fell out of the sky.”

Gao Xingkong was deep in thought for a moment, and then he slowly said, “Stranger still, their expressions and movements looked more or less the same, even their faces seemed a bit similar to each other, as if they were brothers.”

“Brothers?” Tie Jian knitted his brows, “Brothers like that, I only know ...”

He did not continue; he has never been a man who pass judgement easily, based on his status and capacity, he would never pass judgement easily.

But the other men present were all seasoned Jianghu veterans, they understood clearly whom he was referring to. “Are you talking about Tiger and Panther brothers?”

Tie Jian neither confirmed nor denied.

Wooden Taoist laughed again and said, “Even if they were still alive, they would never take the House of Blues’ girls out to drink.” [OK, OK, I admit, it’s a stretch ... the original was Man Cui Lou, man – full, as in Hua Manlou’s name, cui – bluish-green, as in Xiao Cui earlier, lou is also in Hua Manlou’s name, lit. multi-storied building.]

“House of Blues’ girls?” Wang Shidai interrupted, “You seem to be knowledgeable about these things; I take it that you have been to the

House of Blues?"

"Of course I have," Wooden Taoist laughed without any care, "As long as there are wine, I'll go anywhere."

Wang Shidai also roared in laughter, "This old Taoist's manner of speaking is almost exactly like Lu Xiaofeng."

The topic seemed to be back to Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng was ready to leave again.

Yingyan Laoqi suddenly said, "There is one thing I can't quite figure out."

"What is it?" Wooden Taoist asked.

Yingyan Laoqi said, "How can a government official from the Capital who was 'announcing old age and returning home' suddenly turn into a Taoist kitchen helper?"

Lu Xiaofeng's hands and feet turned icy-cold; even if he wanted to leave, now it was already too late.

Yingyan Laoqi flew up and was already blocking his exit. "You can't leave," he coldly said.

Lu Xiaofeng acted surprised, "Why can't I leave?"

Yingyan Laoqi replied, "Because that thing that I can't quite figure out, only you can explain to me."

Gao Xingkong also sprang up. "That's right, he is that friend who is fated to be with wine," he said, "How can he be here?"

The refined, elegant and serene Cloud Room was suddenly filled with murderous aura.

No matter who, anybody who became the Big Boss of the Twelve-dock Alliance would be hard to avoid killing three, five people in a month.

Gao Xingkong, the 'callous and grim bird of prey', was also a renowned formidable character in Jianghu.

As soon as these two started to move, it could only mean one thing: death.

One in front, the other behind, Lu Xiaofeng's escape route has been completely sealed. Even if he could grow ten pair of wings, it would be very difficult for Lu Xiaofeng to fly out of this room.

But if there was one person in the world who could escape from this room, this person must be Lu Xiaofeng.

He suddenly burst out laughing, "Looks like I lose."

"Your loss is decided," Yingyan Laoqi said.

Lu Xiaofeng said with a laugh, "In all my life I have made a bet with others no less than 800 times, but this time it's the worst loss."

"Bet? What bet?" Yingyan Laoqi asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Someone bet me that if I could stay in this room for the time needed to drink a cup of tea without being recognized, he would owe me a round of fine wine, otherwise, from now on he would call me an a\$\$h01e [orig' 'muddled egg']."

Yingyan Laoqi let out a cold laugh.

He did not believe this stuff, yet he could not refrain from asking this question, "Who are you betting against?"

"He himself is certainly an a\$\$h01e," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Not only that, he is a super big a\$\$h01e."

"Who?" Yingyan Laoqi asked.

"Lu Xiaofeng," Lu Xiaofeng said.

As soon as this name was mentioned, everybody could not help being excited, "He is not dead?"

"How could a dead man make a bet with me?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Where is he?" Yingyan Laoqi asked.

Lu Xiaofeng looked up and beckoned toward the window on the opposite side of the room. "Why haven't you come out?" he said.

Naturally everybody could not resist looking that direction, while he himself seized the opportunity to fly out from the other direction.

The windows on both sides were open, like an arrow he flew out, and kicked the eaves with one foot.

By the time the eaves collapsed, he had flown five more zhang [1 zhang ~ 3m/10ft] by borrowing the momentum.

Behind him the people shouted. None of those people's qinggong was weak, although the collapsed eaves delayed them for a moment, very soon they would be able to catch up with him.

Lu Xiaofeng did not even dare to look back.

The Taoist monastery buildings were ancient, tall, open and spacious; although there were a lot of hiding places, he did not dare to take chances.

Today was already the thirteenth, those who ought to arrive have

arrived, and all the guests were martial art experts.

No matter where he was hiding, he was bound to be found; and no matter who found him, it would be very difficult for him to escape.

Naturally he should not escape down the mountain, because he should not miss today's events, nor did he want to miss it.

After three, five twists and turns, he saw some people went up the roof ahead, while he had no doubt that there were people running after him from behind; left and right he saw shadows appearing, practically he was surrounded on all four sides, there was nowhere to go.

He could only jump down.

But there seemed to be more people on the ground, he heard footsteps coming from all directions.

Rounding two, three corners later, he suddenly saw ahead of him someone looking at him with cold eyes, the horse-face was completely devoid of any emotions; it was none other than Peng Changjing's younger martial brother, the Vice Manager of kitchen helpers, the Taoist Changqing.

Lu Xiaofeng was startled. Forcing a laugh he said, "How are you?" [orig. 'ni hao' – lit. are you well/good?]

Changqing coldly replied, "I am not good, you are even worse. I only have to shout, everybody will rush over here. Even if you can knock me

down, it will be useless."

With a bitter smile Lu Xiaofeng said, "So what do you want?"

Changqing said, "I just want to make you understand one thing."

"I already understand," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"In that case," Changqing said, "You'd better let me capture you, it would be better for you in the long run."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "Alright," he said, "Sooner or later I won't be able to escape anyway, I might as well obtain your friendship."

Changqing's eyes brightened, he rushed over in big strides.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Please be lenient to me, alright?"

Changqing replied, "Alright."

He has just started to talk, in fact, he could only speak one word, suddenly he felt something was stuffed into his mouth. He swung his fists randomly trying to repel the attack, but the acupoints on the side of his body were already sealed. Lu Xiaofeng already turned another corner ahead, but he could only stand still and look on helplessly.

Yet he knew that Lu Xiaofeng would not be able to escape, because

around the corner ahead was the main hall.

And right now Wudang Sect Leader happened to be in the main hall.

In front of the main hall, there was an open and spacious courtyard, nobody could hide in there. Inside the main hall, the light was dim, smoke from burning incense curled up; all the dispute and worries of the secular world were isolated outside the doorstep.

Unexpectedly Lu Xiaofeng fled inside.

Obviously he was already planning on hiding inside.

He knew that human beings always have a blind spot, often times hiding in the most obvious place would be more difficult to find instead.

Right now the morning worship time has already passed, and if there were still people inside, they must have been alerted by the commotion outside and went out to investigate.

He really never expected that there was indeed someone in the main hall.

A Taoist priest with an erect stature like jade, was standing silently in front of the altar; it was unclear whether he was praying for the peace and safety of mankind, or he was quietly pondering his own shortcomings.

On the altar in front of him, a sword was laid.

A symbol of honor, glory, and power, the Seven-star Sword.

This man was, surprisingly, Shi Yan.

Lu Xiaofeng was even more shocked. With the tip of his toe he kicked the ground, his body immediately flew up.

But the beam of the main hall was ten zhang [about 30m/100ft] above the ground!

Nobody could leap ten zhang.

When he leaped up, the tip of his left toes lightly pushed the tip of his right toes, unexpectedly he was unleashing the 'cloud ladder step', the ultimate lightness skill, which had disappeared from Wulin for a long time.

Unexpectedly he managed to reach the beam.

Shi Yan was still standing there in silence, as if he had already reached the 'out-of-body' experience.

Lu Xiaofeng had just exhaled in relief, Wang Shidai, Gao Xingkong, Yingyan Laoqi, and Xiao Gu of Mount Ba were rushing in.

"Has anybody come in just now?"

Shi Yan slowly turned around and said, "Yes."

As he heard this single word 'yes', Lu Xiaofeng felt like a criminal who had just heard that he had been sentenced to death.

"Where is he?"

"Right here," Shi Yan smiled, "I have just come in."

Everybody left. Even Shi Yan also left.

If Wudang Sect Leader said that no one came here, even if there was someone who saw Lu Xiaofeng in there, he must have thought that his eyes were playing tricks on him.

There were a lot of people who thought that what Wudang Sect Leader said was even more reliable than their own eyes.

Naturally Shi Yan would never lie; with his eyes and ears, how could he not know if there was anybody coming in?

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly remembered children playing hide-and-seek.

-- A kid was hiding behind his uncle's chair, another kid came in to look for him, the uncle would say, "No one here."

Shi Yan was not his uncle, why did he cover for him?

Lu Xiaofeng did not want to think about it.

The accumulation of dust on the beam was very thick, he was still lying down, hoping to get some sleep. Now he definitely could not show his face again, all he could do was to wait in here.

"Wait till the lamps go out."

When that time came, he could make his move from the beam just the same. That was the reason he picked this place to hide, at least there was no salted white radish smell in here.

Too bad he still could not sleep. He was afraid of falling down.

Not only he was afraid he might fall, he was also afraid the dust on the beam would fall down, hence he simply did not dare to move at all.

And then he started to remember that he was hungry, he began to regret; he regretted why he did not just wait in that room quietly? Surely the smell of salted white radish was not as bad as he imagined?

At this moment there were a lot of people coming into the main hall, sweeping the floor, arranging the chairs, *etc.* And then he heard someone asking, "Who is in charge of the oil lamps?"

"Disciple, Changshen."

"Have you filled up the oil in the lamps?"

"I did, this morning. Disciple has checked once through."

Apparently the person asking the question was very satisfied with the answer, presumably Changshen has always worked prudently.

The strange this was, how could Wudang disciples be bought by Old Sabre Honcho? How could he know Wudang situation this clearly?

Lu Xiaofeng did not want to think about it either.

Recently, he seemed to have been unwilling to use his brains to think about anything.

Most of the people cleaning up had already left, only a few remained in the main hall, perhaps they were on guard duty or needed to finish tidying up.

Then, after a long time, Lu Xiaofeng heard them talking among themselves in low voices, commenting about that 'spy', who impersonate Taoist priest kitchen helper.

"I don't get it, there is no secret here, why did the spy come over here?"

"Maybe he wanted to steal something."

"Stealing from us, impoverished Taoist priests?"

"Don't forget that these past couple of days a lot of distinguished guests are coming up the mountain."

"Maybe he is not a thief, and he is not a spy either."

"What is he then?"

"An assassin! He came to kill those guests."

"We haven't caught him by now?"

"Not yet."

"I think he has already gone down the mountain. He is not stupid, why would he stay on the mountain waiting for death?"

"The one with the worst luck is Changjing; I hear it was he who brought the man up the mountain. Right now the Chief of the Twelve-dock Alliance is interrogating him personally."

"They say Yingyan Laoqi's 'separating tendon, dislocating bones' skill has other usage; under his ministration, even a dead man cannot keep his mouth shut."

Could Changjing keep the secret? But how much did he actually know?

Lu Xiaofeng was starting to get anxious. Suddenly he heard footsteps, two people rushing into the hall; while gasping for breath, they announced the startling news, "Peng Changjing is dead!"

"How did he die?"

"Second Martial Uncle and the others were interrogating him, suddenly a bamboo pole flew in from the outside and nailed him to the chair."

"Did they catch the assassin?"

"They didn't, Great Martial Uncle has already led Second Martial Uncle and the other on a chase."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. He was not surprised at all. Killing people to shut their mouth has always been their usual style.

It's just that the number of people who could nail someone to the chair with a bamboo pole was indeed not many. Even Cousin, Housekeeper, and the other definitely did not have that kind of profound strength.

Other than Lu Xiaofeng, who else had infiltrated Wudang?

Wu Hu brothers and Shi He would not dare to go up the mountain this early. Could it be Old Sabre Honcho himself?

What identity did he assume? Did he also disguise himself as a Taoist priest kitchen helper?

Suddenly someone down below asked, "Changjing is dead, it has nothing to do with us, why did you have to rush here to deliver the news?"

"Although it has nothing to do with you, it definitely has something to do with Martial [older] Brother Changshen ..."

"I get it," another voice interrupted, "Changjing is dead, Changqing is being punished, naturally Martial Brother Changshen will become our new manager; hence you rushed over here to deliver the news."

Apparently these six Taoist priest kitchen workers did not have pure heart either; they still scrambled for power and profit, just like common people.

Lu Xiaofeng was sighing inwardly. Suddenly he heard a sharp, strange sound coming from the outside.

Even he could not tell clearly what kind of noise was that, he only felt that it pierced his ears and that it was difficult to bear.

Right in that instant, the main hall was filled with a chain of short, tragic shriek, "It's you ..." The sentence was not finished, all the voices were abruptly cut off.

Lu Xiaofeng could not resist craning out his neck to look down quietly. Only one look, his hands and feet turned cold.

There were originally nine people in the main hall; nine living people, but in that split second nine living people had turned into nine dead people.

Nine people's throat had been slit, undoubtedly they all died under a sword blade.

A deadly sword!

All Wudang disciples had some martial art foundation, yet they were all killed in a flash.

The sharp, strange sound he heard just now was the sound of sword blade splitting the air.

What a fast sword! What a deadly sword!

Even Ximen Chuixue's sword, which could roam the world unhindered, may not necessarily surpass this sword!

Who was the assailant?

Why would he want to kill these insignificant Taoist priest kitchen workers?

"Because of Changshen," Lu Xiaofeng suddenly understood, "He already knew that with Changjing's death, other people would certainly question Changshen; hence he rushed over here to kill Changshen to silence him."

Changjing's killer must be him as well!

This person unexpectedly was able to come and go into Wudang headquarter and kill people at will; who was this person? What was his capacity?

"It's you ..."

Before his death Changshen was still able to say those two words, obviously he knew the person's identity, but he never expected that this man would be the assassin.

Lu Xiaofeng started to regret again, he regretted that as soon as the noise was heard, he did not stick out his head to see.

It could very well be his only chance to see this person's real identity. A lost opportunity, perhaps it would never come again.

Dead men tell no tales. It did not matter if Yingyan Laoqi's 'separating tendon, dislocating bones' skill was even more formidable, dead men simply would not talk.

Therefore, the operation would certainly proceed as planned.

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng still had to wait, to wait for the sky to turn dark, to wait for the lamps to be lit, and then to wait for the lamps to go out.

Waiting is definitely not the most comfortable feeling.

Chapter 15 – Scheming under heavy siege

Translated by Foxs

The thirteenth of the fourth month, dusk.

The sky gradually turned dark, the lamps in the main hall have been lit.

But above the beam was still dark, sunlight could not reach there, lamp light could not reach that place either. Actually, there are a lot of places in the world that are just like that, *i.e.* in perpetual darkness.

Some people are like that, too.

Could it be that Lu Xiaofeng has turned into that kind of person? Could it be that he would not get another chance to stick his head out, and could only hide in the dark like a mouse, hiding from Ximen Chuixue?

Perhaps he still had a chance. Perhaps this operation was his only chance; therefore, he simply must not fail.

But he did not have any confidence.

To be fair, who would have confidence of snatching the Taoist crown from Shi Yan's head? He could not think of anyone.

He heard other footsteps coming into the main hall. The one on the head of the procession had very light footsteps, although he was walking in such haste, because all his chi, his blood, his muscles, were already linked together. Although he still had flesh and blood, he was unlike

everybody else.

Nothing was wasted from his body.

Lu Xiaofeng could not resist peeking out from atop the beam, sneakily looking down. A procession of Taoist priests wearing purple robes and black hats was entering the main hall. The one leading the procession was, unexpectedly, Wooden Taoist.

He had known Wooden Taoist for many years, but not until now did he realize that this senior Wudang swordsman's power was actually a lot higher than everybody had always thought.

Shi Yan has not arrived. The first chair on the host side was still empty. Wooden Taoist could only sit on the second chair.

Although he was a person of virtue and prestige, his seniority was extremely high, but when the Sect Leader was present, he would have to occupy the second position.

It was Wudang's law, but it was also the established standard in Jianghu; no one could change it.

The main hall was brightly lit. And then there was the sound of gong. Wooden Taoist stepped down the stairs to welcome the guests. One after another all the honored guests arrived.

Everybody looked very serious, Yingyan Laoqi and the others looked especially grim; obviously they still could not forget what had happened

earlier that day.

That big and tall, majestic looking old man also came. Unexpectedly his seat was above the Chief of the Twelve-dock Alliance's.

Who was he? How come he never showed his face in Jianghu before? Why did he appear this time?

From the moment he arrived, Lu Xiaofeng has been fixing his eyes on him; he had a vague feeling that he ought to know this man, but he just could not figure it out.

The number of chairs in the main hall was really not too many; the number of people with enough qualifications to sit in this hall was indeed not too many. But the number of guests was quite a lot. Those who did not have seat could only stand.

Tie Jian, Shi Yan, Wang Shidai, Shuishang Fei, Gao Xingkong, Xiao Gu of Mount Ba, Yingyan Laoqi, and the others had people standing behind them; anybody could be the one waiting for an opportunity to take their lives.

Among those people, how many were those who had died once and were resurrected? Which one was Du Tiexin? Which one was Guan Tianwu? Which one was Old Lady Lou?

Lu Xiaofeng was trying to identify them.

After they had their appearances changed, other than Old Sabre

Honcho and Canine Master, Lu Xiaofeng was the only one who knew.

Canine Master had made a portrait drawing of everyone's new appearance, and had given the drawings to Lu Xiaofeng.

-- In all the first-class inns, the lavatory has always been fairly spacious. Other than going to the bathroom, people could do a lot of other things.

Hai Qikuo killed the dog. But since it was a real dog, where did Canine Master go?

Could it be that this secret was also known only to Lu Xiaofeng?

Very soon he was able to find them. Even the man-without-a-face, Shi He, now had a face.

Obviously every one of them had their eyes fixed on their respective target, all they were waiting for was for the lamps to go out, and then they would immediately make their move.

It seemed that the only one without anybody dealing with was Wooden Taoist. Was it because he has not paid any attention to Jianghu matters for a long time that Old Sabre Honcho practically did not consider him as a target?

Lu Xiaofeng did not ponder over this question too far, because right that moment his own target has appeared.

Wearing purple and gold Taoist crown on his head, the Wudang Sect Leader slowly walked in, followed by four law enforcement escorts.

This Taoist priest Shi Yan's name was known throughout the present age, not only because of his deep spiritual cultivation and numerous meritorious deeds, but also because since he was young he had been a veteran of a hundred battles; his swordsmanship and internal energy cultivation were also at the level that very few people could accomplish.

But now unexpectedly he looked very tired, he looked very old and weak, he looked a bit nervous even.

Shi Yan was indeed a bit nervous.

Facing so many honored guests and distinguish visitors, although he had to put on a smiling face to welcome the guests, in his heart he was actually very tense and jittery.

For the last ten years, he very rarely had this kind of feeling.

However, today he seemed to have some kind of of ominous feeling, a premonition that something bad was about to happen.

"Maybe I should retire," he said to himself, "I'll go find a peaceful and remote place, build two wooden cabins, and henceforth no longer care about the right and wrong in the Jianghu, and no longer see any Jianghu people either."

Unfortunately, up to now, this thought was no more than a fantasy;

whether he could really escape unscathed from the Jianghu's right and wrong, even he himself was not quite sure. If he failed to seize the opportunity, there was a very good chance that it would be too late.

Every time he was tired, the back of his neck would feel stiff, and then his old ailment, a severe headache, would flare-up.

Especially now, when he had to wear the heavy purple and gold Taoist crown, which felt like a saucepan lid pressing down his head.

All the distinguished guests stood up to welcome him.

Although he knew that they only respected him because he was the Sect Leader of Wudang, although he did not completely like this people, he still had to put on the warmest smile on his face, while he greeted the guests one by one to return the courtesy.

-- Wasn't it just like acting in a play?

-- Since you have the role as the leader of this Sect, it doesn't matter if your neck is stiff, if your head is aching, the show must go on, you simply must continue acting.

The lamps in the main hall were blazing.

Under the bright light, Tie Jian and Wang Shidai definitely looked more tired than he, they looked even older and weaker than he.

As a matter of fact, they should have had retired and returned to their native place to live in seclusion a long time ago; they did not need to come here at all.

He did not wish to see them, especially Wang Shidai. "An obvious narrow-minded man who always keep others' offense and want to pay back, yet acted like a man enduring the hardships of life and put on an appearance of despising worldly conventions."

And then there was that Xiao Gu of Mount Ba, who always love to look in the mirror; he really ought to open a brothel, why did he leave home [to become Buddhist monk or Taoist priest] instead?

Why is it that there are so many people in the world that are not able to do what they really want to do?

The ceremony was underway. Every step of the program, Shi Yan himself was unclear how many times he had performed; every word he had to say, he did not remember how many times he had spoken those same words.

It did not matter what he thought, he would not make a single mistake; everything seemed to be going without a hitch.

And then he had to announce the name of his successor.

With the corner of his eye he looked at several of his most important disciples, those who were most promising, but also those who appeared most nervous.

If the name he announced did not belong to one of these people, what would their expression look like? How would the other people react?

Wouldn't it be very interesting to see?

Thinking about this, he could not stop a smile from appearing on the corners of his mouth, he nearly could not even resist from laughing.

But he quickly controlled himself and braced himself to continue with the most important segment of the ceremony.

Just then, the altar lamps in the main hall, which had never stop burning day and night, unexpectedly went out suddenly.

Instantly there was a danger sign appearing in his heart, he knew right then that the ominous feeling, the premonition in his heart has already come true.

Almost at the same instant, all seventy-two altar lamps inside and outside the main hall went out together.

Several sharp, swishing noise was heard in the dark, the candles on the incense burning table were also being struck and went out together.

The brightly lit main hall suddenly turned into a blanket of darkness.

Suddenly a series of miserable cry was heard in the dark, followed by

even sharper gust of wind, coming from the beam blowing toward his head, blowing the Taoist crown off the top of his head; it sounded like the brushing of sleeve of a night walker.

By the time he reached up to hold the Taoist crown, the Taoist crown had disappeared.

“Qiang!” the Seven-Star Sword on his waist was unsheathed, but it was not he who pulled it out.

Instantly he pulled back, but the ribs on his flank suddenly felt icy-cold, as if a sword blade has just swept across.

All these things seemed to happen at the same moment.

Most of the people there did not even know what was going on, naturally they would not know what to do to meet this contingency.

Those mournful, miserable cry had made these turns of events seem even more mysterious and frightening.

Surprisingly, the voices of Tie Jian and Wang Shidai, those top-ranking martial art experts, seemed to be among those miserable cries. And then Wooden Taoist’s shout was heard, “Who has fire paper? Quickly light the lamps.”

Unexpectedly, his voice was still very calm, although Shi Yan could hear the pain in it.

Could it be that he was also injured?

Although it all happened very fast, everyone there felt as if it were forever.

What had happened in that split second, no one would ever forget.

At last the lamps were re-lit, everybody was even more shocked, even more terrified. No one could believe his own eyes, yet these things were real.

-- Tie Jian, Wang Shidai, Xiao Gu of Mount Ba, Shuishang Fei, Gao Xingkong, Yingyan Laoqi, and several most important disciples of Wudang, were down; they fell down in pools of blood.

Wang Shidai even had a sword still sticking out from his waist, the sword's blade has pierced his fatal point until only the sword hilt was visible outside.

Wooden Taoist also had some bloodstain on his body; but although he was injured, he was still the most calm.

"The assailants must still be here, before the truth is known, it would be best if everybody remains here."

It was an extraordinary incident, the tone of his voice became very grave, "No matter who, whoever leaves this main hall a single step will

not be able to wash off the suspicion of being the murderer; in that case, please do not blame our School's disciples for being rude to the honored guests."

No one dared to leave, no one dared to even move.

The situation was indeed too grave, no one was willing to bear the slightest risk of being a suspect.

The strange thing was, nobody remaining in the main hall had any weapons in them; where did the saber and sword used for killing come from? And where did they go?

Although Shi Yan's injury was not heavy, he appeared to be more grieved, more angry, and more dispirited than others.

Wooden Taoist lowered his voice, "The assailants can't be just one person. As soon as they finished striking, most likely they used the darkness as a cover to walk away, but they can't possibly all leave Wudang's premise."

Shi Yan could not resist asking, "Since we all have to stay in the main hall, who is going to go after them?"

"I'll go," Wooden Taoist said.

He looked around at the Wudang disciples who were waiting for orders, "I have to bring several capable people."

Shi Yan said, "Our School's disciples are at Shishu's [martial (younger) uncle] disposal."

Wooden Taoist left immediately, taking along ten people; obviously these people were all elites disciples of Wudang School.

Watching him leaving in a hurry, Shi Yan's eyes suddenly revealed some kind of odd look.

The big, tall, and majestic looking old man quietly came over to him and said in very low voice, "It indeed happened."

Shi Yan nodded. Suddenly he pulled himself together and raised his spirit, "It was an extraordinary incident, I am obliged to ask everybody to wait here a bit longer. Wu Gou, lead the disciples under your command to take the Seniors died for a just cause to the Ting Zhu Courtyard first. Wu Jing, Wu Se, lead your disciples to search everywhere, as soon as you find any weapon, report immediately."

"You might as well let them search me first," the big, tall, and majestic looking old man said.

Shi Yan let out a wry smile and said, "If you want to kill, would you need any saber or sword?"

The old man said, "In that case, I want to accompany your Shishu to go after the killers."

"Please," Shi Yan said.

The old man cupped his fist, bent his waist, and then shot out like an arrow.

Instantly some people in the crowd of heroes voiced their dissatisfaction, "We are not allowed to leave, why is he allowed to leave?"

"Because his status is different than any other people."

"Who is he?"

"He is ..." A loud commotion drowned his man's voice, two Taoist priests in purple robes rushed in in big strides, carrying a sword with both hands. Surprisingly, it was Wudang Sect Leader's own Seven-star Sword.

But the other treasure that he wore, the purple and gold Taoist crown, was like a yellow crane flying away without leaving any trace.

The thirteenth of the fourth month, midnight.

The night was as cool as water.

At this moment, only one person knew where the gold and purple Taoist crown had gone. This person was, naturally, Lu Xiaofeng.

Nobody knew where he bought a giant round, sun-patterned, felt-lined,

bamboo rain hat, which he wore on his head, covering more than half of his face.

The gold and purple crown was on his head, also covered by the felt-lined bamboo rain hat.

It was snatched away from Shi Yan's head using the priceless two fingers of his; he had not failed.

But in that split second when he made his move, the clothes on his whole body was soaked with cold sweats.

He knew the entire operation had succeeded, because as he swept out of the main hall, he heard miserable cry of Tie Jian and the others.

His clothes had already dried out. He had been circling around the dark alleys several times, making sure that he was not being followed, and then from the corner gate of the rear courtyard he slipped into the House of Blues.

The rear courtyard was awfully quiet, he neither heard anybody nor saw any lantern light.

"Those people are not back yet?"

He was just thinking of finding anybody to ask when suddenly from the hexagonal pavilion at the edge of the flower garden he heard a hiss, "Here."

It was Liu Qingqing's voice.

When she saw Lu Xiaofeng, her expression looked very strange, as if she was very surprised, but was very happy as well, "You succeeded too?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. "The others?" he asked.

"More or less," Liu Qingqing replied, "We are all here, just waiting for Old Sabre Honcho."

She bit her lip and looked at Lu Xiaofeng with the corner of her eye, "I just didn't think that we would be really successful this time," she said.

"Why not?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because I was always a little suspicious of you," Liu Qingqing said, "Especially with what happened to Canine Master, and that waiter who took the dog for a walk for you, and then that man who dug worms at the Ye family house."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "That just proves one thing: you are ten times more paranoid than other people."

Liu Qingqing also laughed. She was just going to pull his hand when suddenly a shaft of light shot out from within the cluster of flowers. Xiao Cui was standing behind the lantern, staring at them, "Alright, alright, everybody is downstairs waiting, but the two of you are holding hands

and whispering sweet nothing to each other in here.”

It was only then did Lu Xiaofeng find out that their secret gathering room was right underneath a clump of Chinese rose flowers.

Every detail of this scheme has been carefully set up, but up to the last minute, other than Old Sabre Honcho, no one else had a full understanding of what was going on.

Even now, no one has ever seen his true identity. “But he will definitely come very soon.”

It was a spacious room, and the ventilation was very good, although everybody was still panting for breath from the excitement. The people who took part in this operation have all arrived; surprisingly, it went without any glitch, no one was injured or suffered any damage.

It was just a split second of intense moment and thrill, which subsided very quickly, but everybody still appeared very excited, but almost nobody talked.

Some people had bloodstain on the front of their robes, presumably when they made their move, they used too much strength that their victim’s blood splashed on their body, so much so that some even had their faces splattered with blood.

They ought to be happy, because what they did tonight would surely change the Wulin world’s history and destiny.

"Why aren't there any wine here? Our mission was accomplished, why can't we drink a cup or two to celebrate?"

"Because Old Sabre Honcho has not come back."

"Why hasn't he come back?"

"Because he still had a lot to do," a voice from the outside replied, "He still had to block the pursuing troops from you, and checked the outcome of the battle."

Old Sabre Honcho finally appeared. Undoubtedly it was a very glorious outcome, because his voice sounded a bit hoarse from excitement.

And then he formally declared, "The strike hit its target, the chief offenders have been completely punished, Operation Thunder is a complete success!"

Careful and thorough plans, speedy and accurate execution, as long as anybody is able to accomplish these two factors, no matter what operation, success is guaranteed.

But Old Sabre Honcho seemed to have forgotten something, he did not ask Lu Xiaofeng at all, whether he was successful or not; how did he know that the operation was a complete success?

Unless by the time the lamps were lit he was still in the main hall, and saw that the purple and gold crown was no longer on Shi Yan's head.

Lu Xiaofeng could not resist asking, "Aren't you forgetting to ask something from me?"

He suddenly took off the felt-lined bamboo rain hat, the purple and gold crown immediately sent out a glorious and beautiful sparkle under the lantern light.

But Old Sabre Honcho only took one look and said, "I am in no hurry."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "Of course you are in no hurry, because what you really wanted was not this purple and gold crown, but that Seven-star Sword."

He did not really want to say those words, but all of a sudden he had the unstoppable urge to say it anyway, "When I snatched the purple and gold crown away, Shi Yan must've reached up to hold it down, hence you have the opportunity to seize the sword on his waist."

Old Sabre Honcho was staring at him with cold eyes, waiting for him to continue.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "All along that secret has been hidden in the sword hilt, but Shi Yan has never used it to blackmail anybody. Yet you are still worried, because the biggest secret of all belongs to you. That's why you have to personally seize the sword, so that this secret will not fall into the second person's hands."

Surprisingly, Old Sabre Honcho did not deny at all, "But his hand has

always been holding the sword hilt, that's why I could use you. Later on he will definitely think that the mastermind of this operation is precisely you."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Old Sabre Honcho replied, "Because when you strike, you must have used a lot of power, the purple and gold crown must have been pinched by your two fingers and thus leave two finger marks. The person who is able to snatch away the Taoist crown from his head, other than Lu Xiaofeng, I am afraid there is no second person. It will be the best evidence against you."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed; he said, "Turns out not only you wanted me to distract his attention, you also want me to be the scapegoat."

"This is called 'killing two birds with one stone' scheme," Old Sabre Honcho said.

It was the most crucial key of the entire operation, Lu Xiaofeng did not fully understand it. Until now. He could only laughed bitterly and said, "But I still don't understand, since you managed to seize his sword away, why didn't you kill him as well?"

"Because he doesn't have long to live anyway," Old Sabre Honcho said.

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked. "Why?" he asked.

"Because he had an incurable disease," Old Sabre Honcho replied, "He

has at most only two to three months to live."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "No wonder he was eager to shift the announcement on who will be his successor to an earlier date."

Old Sabre Honcho coldly said, "Too bad that the capable Wudang disciples who will be able to take the leadership have all died in our hands."

Lu Xiaofeng fixed his gaze on him, "That's why now he could only hand over the Sect Leader position to you."

Old Sabre Honcho's fists suddenly tightened; he said with a cold laugh, "You are a smart man, you shouldn't have said those words."

With a rueful smile Lu Xiaofeng said, "Too bad I can't help saying it."

Old Sabre Honcho suddenly raised his voice, "Madame Lou [orig. 'madame Lou of Jin Clan' (i.e. her maiden name was Jin), Guan Tianwu, Du Tiexin, Gao Tao, Hai Qikuo, Gu Feiyun."

As he called out each name, the person immediately stood up and stared at Lu Xiaofeng.

Old Sabre Honcho coldly said, "Do you think these six people will be able to subdue you?"

"Two or three of them will be enough," Lu Xiaofeng said.

With a cold laugh Old Sabre Honcho said, "You still want them to make their move?"

"I don't want them to make their move," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Old Sabre Honcho said, "Then why haven't you put out your hands to be tied up?"

"Because I know that they will not make their move," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Get him!" Old Sabre Honcho said sternly.

Although his voice was rather loud, these six people seemed to have suddenly become deaf, nobody even moved.

The pupil of Old Sabre Honcho's eyes shrank, while Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

He said with a smile, "If they made their move right now, they would only get one person."

"Who?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

"You," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Six people really did turn around to face Old Sabre Honcho, and then

they said in chorus, "Are you waiting for us to make our move?"

Old Sabre Honcho's body stiffened, "If it was not for me, your bones would have been rotten by now," he said, "How dare you betray me?"

Lu Xiaofeng interrupted, "It's not that they want to betray you, you have only yourself to blame for doing something wrong."

The underground room suddenly became very quiet. Other than Liu Qingqing and Xiao Cui, everybody else seemed to be unusually calm, it was as if they had already anticipated this shocking change.

Could it be that all these people have betrayed him?

Old Sabre Honcho clenched his fists even more tightly, "What did I do wrong?" he asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Your plan was meticulous and ingenious, but it had a fatal flaw."

Old Sabre Honcho did not believe him.

He really could not believe him, because he had considered this plan over and over repeatedly in his head.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "The most ingenious part of your plan was precisely the people you sent out on this mission were all dead people, and then you changed them into other people who practically do not exist;

naturally no one in Jianghu would pay any attention to their actions.”

He chuckled, and then continued, “Too bad that this part is also the biggest vulnerability of your plan.”

Old Sabre Honcho did not understand.

This explanation was really not easy to understand.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, “If you had changed Gao Tao into Shuishang Fei, even if Canine Master really had the ultimate disguising skill in the world, there would still be people who recognize him; at least Shuishang Fei’s friends and close relatives would.”

He patted ‘the’ Housekeeper’s shoulder, “But the way you changed them, practically there is no such person in the world, naturally there won’t be anybody in the world who would recognize them.”

This part was relatively easier to understand.

Naturally Old Sabre Honcho also understood, it was the most basic idea of his plan.

Lu Xiaofeng said, “But you missed a point.”

Old Sabre Honcho could not resist asking, “Which point?”

Lu Xiaofeng pointed to Housekeeper's face, "Gao Tao could become like this, naturally other people could also become like this."

Old Sabre Honcho admitted. As long as there was an elaborately made human-skin mask, coupled with a master in disguising art, anybody could become like that.

"After Gao Tao became like this, no one could recognize him," Lu Xiaofeng continued, "And when other people also became like this, naturally there won't be anybody who could recognize him either."

Because basically there was no such person existed, therefore, no one would pay any attention to him. Old Sabre Honcho was no exception.

Suddenly Old Sabre Honcho's hands trembled. "Are you saying that this is not Gao Tao?" he asked.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "Finally you understand what I am talking about," he said.

This 'Housekeeper' also laughed, and then he tore off the human-skin mask from his face. Unexpectedly 'he' was a woman who did not look too old.

Naturally this person was not Gao Tao.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "This Miss is the good sister of First Lady Gongsun of the past, she also happens to be my good friend. All along I had a hard time finding any housekeeper who is neither man nor a

woman like Gao Tao, hence I had to turn to her for help."

Old Sabre Honcho was stumped for words.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "You can disguise Gao Tao to look like this, naturally I can also ask others to disguise her to look like this."

Old Sabre Honcho gnashed his teeth, "Did Canine Master betray me?" he asked.

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. He said, "Because he is also a human, and not a dog at all. Even a dog, when you push it against the wall, it will jump over; let alone a human?"

"He is not dead?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

"If he were," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "How could we disguise this Miss to look exactly like Housekeeper's disguise so that even you could not tell it apart?"

"And the mask is also Gao Tao's?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

"It was peeled off his face," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"What about Gao Tao?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

"The things he managed have already been too much," Lu Xiaofeng

replied, "He ought to take a rest long ago." [Translator's note: in Chinese, 'housekeeper' is 'manager of the house', hence it was a play on words.]

Liu Qingqing suddenly said, "It's that night, at Ye Lingfeng's mansion; you played your trick!"

Now that she thought about it, when the lamps went out that night, why didn't she find a single one of them? Lu Xiaofeng took advantage of the darkness to subdue Gao Tao, Gu Feiyun, and Hai Qikuo, and then had three other persons to assume their disguise, so much so that they were using the very same human-skin mask, and were disguised by the same hands that disguised them in the first place.

"That day Canine Master was also there?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"He had been waiting there," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

He smiled and said, "When we go down the mountain, the very next day I have already asked people to find the same dog, and then when the dog was taken out for a walk, the two dogs were swapped."

Dogs' appearances are more or like the same, other than the people who are very close to it, certainly no one can tell the difference.

Liu Qingqing sighed, "I have already felt that the waiter who took the dog out for a walk for you was a bit suspicious."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "Your paranoia has always been heavier than other people's."

"And that man who dig earthworms?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"He was the waiter who took the dog out for me," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Who is he, actually?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"Sikong Zhaixing!" Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Of course it was Sikong Zhaixing. This world famous lone thief; not only his qinggong had reached the peak, his resourcefulness surpassed others, he was also an expert in disguising skill.

"Are all the people here not the same persons they originally were?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"Only two persons are still the same," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Which two?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"One is me, the other you," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Why didn't you deal with me that day?" Liu Qingqing asked.

"Because you are too close to Old Sabre Honcho," Lu Xiaofeng replied,
"We were afraid he might see the flaw ..."

Liu Qingqing bit her lip. Suddenly she sent a punch toward his nose.

Lu Xiaofeng did not duck, she did not continue punching either. Because just as quick she pulled her fist back. But her eyes were still glowering at Lu Xiaofeng.

"I just want you to understand one thing," she shouted.

"What is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Liu Qingqing said, "The only person who is closest to me right now is you!"

Lu Xiaofeng felt a bit of bitterness, and a bit of ache, in his heart.

But if anyone wanted to do something for the good of a lot of people, he must be ready to make a little sacrifice.

He struggled hard to pretend that he did not see the tears in her eyes, he fought himself hard not to think about this thing.

Even if he wanted to show remorse and shed some tears, he had to wait until tomorrow, because right now he still had a lot of things to do.

Because he was Lu Xiaofeng.

Someone trimmed the wick of the lamp, the underground room grew

brighter.

Old Sabre Honcho calmed down instead; he asked, "Since you already seized control of the situation, why did you proceed according to my plan?"

"Because we still don't know who Old Sabre Honcho really is," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Therefore, we need to lure you into the net."

It was the critical phase of his plan, because even now, he still has not seen Old Sabre Honcho's true identity.

In fact, no one has.

Old Sabre Honcho let out a cold laugh and said, "Now finally you will soon see who I am. Too bad Tie Jian and the others will never know."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly chuckled again and said, "You really think they are all dead? Look again, who are they?"

The entrance to the underground room suddenly opened, a group of people slowly came in one by one. They were precisely the people who were lying in pools of blood a moment ago; Tie Jian, Wang Shidai, Gao Xingkong, Shuishang Fei, Xiao Gu of Mount Ba, Yingyan Laoqi, and the five top experts of Wudang School.

Surprisingly the big, tall, majestic looking old man was also among them.

Shi Yan was the last.

As he walked down, the door to the underground room was still open.

Lu Xiaofeng was just speaking, "With disguising experts like Wang Laoqianbei [old senior], Sikong Zhaixing and Canine Master, pretending to be dead is not a very difficult thing to do; besides ..."

He had not finished speaking, Old Sabre Honcho suddenly leaped up, and then like an arrow he flew out. A sword appeared in his palm, a sword that was out of its sheath.

His body and his sword seemed to blend into a single entity, as with lightning-fast speed he attacked Shi Yan.

Shi Yan also had a sword.

The secret inside the hilt has been removed, but the Seven-star Sword had returned to his hand.

He wanted to draw the sword, but suddenly he felt a stab of pain below his ribs; the new wound and the old ailment flared-up simultaneously.

Old Sabre Honcho's sword had reached his throat, the person himself had also arrived behind Shi Yan's back; and then with one hand he twisted Shi Yan's arm and said, "Anybody dares to move, I'll kill him immediately!"

No one dared to move.

Although he had an incurable disease, no one could see this Sect Leader of Wudang, this honest, considerate and upright senior, die under the sword.

Therefore, everybody could only watch Old Sabre Honcho stepped backwards.

With a cold laugh Old Sabre Honcho said, "Although my plan is not successful, your plan seems to fail at the final moment as well."

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "If we agree to let you go, will you let us see your true identity?"

"I won't," Old Sabre Honcho replied.

He laughed aloud, and then said, "No one can ever see my true identity, not ever."

His laughter stopped abruptly.

His body suddenly lunged forward, and then rolled down along seven, eight stone steps, until he finally stopped face down on the ground, with blood gushing out of his back like a fountain.

His bamboo rain hat also rolled away.

A man slowly descended the stone steps; there was a sword in his hand, the tip of the sword was still dripping blood.

Lu Xiaofeng's countenance suddenly changed.

If it were not for the fact that he was still wearing a mask, everybody would have been greatly shocked.

Because his countenance has become too terrifying.

Chapter 16 – To be one step ahead of the opponent

The last one descending the stone steps was not Ximen Chuixue at all, it was Wooden Taoist. He was the actual person who entered last; obviously Old Sabre Honcho did not expect anybody else behind Shi Yan. The mantis stalks the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind [idiom from Taoist classic Zhuangzi]; indeed there are many things in the world just like that.

Lu Xiaofeng did not seem to think that he would come either; he looked at him in shock, and then he turned his gaze toward the Old Sabre Honcho, who was lying in a pool of blood. Suddenly he asked, "Why did you kill him? Why didn't you leave him alive to get information from him?"

"We already found out his secret," Wooden Taoist replied, "Even if we asked again, we won't get anything more. Although my hand was a bit too heavy, we definitely got rid of future trouble."

"But we have not seen his true identity," Lu Xiaofeng objected.

Wooden Taoist chuckled and said, "After he died, we can still see his true identity."

Lu Xiaofeng was taken aback, and then he laughed, "The past few days I am indeed too tired; my head is also so tired that I cannot even think."

Wooden Taoist laughed and said, "There are times when we all cannot think. What I am afraid of is having no head with which to think."

-- When anybody dies, his true identity can still be seen.

-- What we are afraid of is if the dead man has no face to be seen.

Lu Xiaofeng turned Old Sabre Honcho over to look at his face. He was stunned again.

Because what he saw was a head without a face. The black holes where the eyes were carried an indescribable mockery, as if he was saying, "No one will ever see my face again, never ..."

Everybody was stunned, even Liu Qingqing was stunned.

Shi Yan let out a long breath; he said, "Although he has no face, I still recognize him."

"Of course you recognize him," Wooden Taoist said, "I recognize him too."

He looked up. In that instant, he seemed to be aging a lot, "This man was our School's renegade, Shi He."

"Wrong," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Not Shi He."

His voice was firm and full of confidence; he seemed to be very sure of what he had just said.

If he was not, he would not say it in front of these people in that room.

It was an elegant and quiet study room, located in a very secure and secret place.

Anybody who wished to enter this study room must go through seven tightly guarded doors.

Nearly every one of the men who guarded the room was a top-ranking Wulin expert, they consisted of the most outstanding disciples of Wudang, Shaolin, Yandang, and Mount Ba schools, plus several most astute, capable and experienced helm-masters of the Yangtze River's Water Fort and the Twelve-dock Alliance.

Without these people's permission, absolutely no one could burst into the room.

Even the news of their presence in the building was a completely guarded information.

They called this place 'the Eagle's Nest'. The plan to deal with 'the Mansion of Spirits' this time was decided just three months ago in this 'Eagle's Nest'.

It was a top secret plan.

The first step of the plan was to convince Ximen Chuixue to create a

conflict and hatred between he and Lu Xiaofeng, so that Jianghu people would think that he simply must kill Lu Xiaofeng.

It was not an easy task, Ximen Chuixue was not a man who could be easily persuaded.

Who would have thought that this time Ximen Chuixue did not refuse at all? Obviously he thought that hunting and killing Lu Xiaofeng would be interesting. His only condition was ...

"You must run away for real, because I am going to pursue you for real too. If I overtake you, I might kill you for real."

Therefore, when he was running away, Lu Xiaofeng was running in cold sweat all the time.

The second step of the plan was to arrange Lu Xiaofeng's escape route; he must 'unintentionally' make contact with people from the 'Mansion of Spirits', and he must not be suspected at all.

During his flight, he still had to cope with all difficulties on his own, and must not make any contact with anybody else.

Whether Lu Xiaofeng could really sneak into the Mansion of Spirits, they did not have any confidence at all.

But he was willing to take this risk.

Actually, they had learned about this Mansion of Spirits organization for quite some time, but all along they failed to grab the least bit of clue. Except that from the mouth of a dying stranger they learned that this organization was going to do some earth-shattering thing very soon.

So they did not have any choice but to start their own operation.

Because they found out that this dying stranger was the real Gu Feiyun, who was supposed to die under Ximen Chuixue's sword many years ago.

He escaped from the Mansion of Spirits, and was forced by Shi He to jump into ten-thousand zhang deep ravine. Although luckily he did not die, both his legs were broken. Relying only on his pair of hands and a strong will, he crawled out of the valley for five days and four nights, before by chance he met a Taoist priest who was out to gather herbs deep in the mountains.

The Taoist priest happened to be a Wudang disciple. Gu Feiyun managed to live to tell the Mansion of Spirits' secret. Too bad his knowledge was really limited, plus he was at his last breath.

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng had already known from the start that 'Cousin' was not Gu Feiyun.

Actually, Shi Yan of Wudang was the initiator of this plan. The first person he looked for was precisely Lu Xiaofeng.

-- If there was one person in the world able to accomplish this arduous task, that person was, without a doubt, Lu Xiaofeng.

But Lu Xiaofeng also realized that relying on his strength alone, he would definitely fail. Hence he insisted on getting a few good men to help him. And he believed that among these few, he simply could not lack Sikong Zhaixing.

To convince Sikong Zhaixing was more difficult than persuading Ximen Chuixue. Luckily he had a weakness.

He loved to bet. Especially betting against Lu Xiaofeng; he did not care what it was that he was betting, as long as it was against Lu Xiaofeng.

So Lu Xiaofeng told him, "If I fail, you must dig earthworms for me."

By the time Sikong Zhaixing realized it was a trap, it was already too late. Hence, in order not to lose, he simply must help Lu Xiaofeng to succeed with all his might.

He had always been a man of his word.

But he also insisted to have another helper that they must not go without; he wanted Lu Xiaofeng to find Hua Manlou for him.

Nobody could surpass Hua Manlou's meticulous thought; maybe exactly because he could not see that he spent more time in thought than anyone else.

The original plan was for the four of them to reach decision in the

'Eagle's nest'.

But four people's power was naturally still not enough; therefore, they pulled in six more people.

They were Tie Jian of Shaolin, Wang Shidai of Beggar Clan, Shuishang Fei of Yangtze River, Gao Xingkong of Yandang, Xiao Gu of Mount Ba, and Yingyan Laoqi of the Twelve-dock Alliance.

Because each one of all these six people had a disciple of their school in the Mansion of Spirits.

Their territories also happened to be spread out between Mansion of Spirits and Wudang.

But the most important factor was that they all men who absolutely guarded their mouth like a closed bottle, they would never leak the secret of this operation to anybody.

From the outside, this building was a very ordinary-looking two-story building in the downtown area. It was bought using the name of a helm master under Yingyan Laoqi's command. The three storefronts downstairs were used to open a drugstore, a wine shop, and a coffin shop.

The three shops' proprietors were naturally the most loyal, as well as capable and experienced, disciples of their schools.

The number of people who were privy of this plan was only ten. The rest of the people merely took orders from these ten.

Right now, out of ten people, eight were present.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at them, and repeated what he just said with a renewed emphasis, "Not Shi He. Definitely not him."

Shi Yan was not present, apparently his illness was serious. The only other person who had seen Shi He was Tie Jian.

That day when Wudang was about to inaugurate a new sect leader, when Shi He destroyed his own face, this senior monk from Shaolin was also present.

He had seen this 'face without a face'. Anybody who had seen it once will never forget.

Therefore, he objected, "I have seen his face, I am absolutely sure that he was Shi He."

"The one died under Wooden Taoist's hand was of course Shi He," Lu Xiaofeng said, "But Shi He was not Old Sabre Honcho. Absolutely not."

"How can you be so sure?" Sikong Zhaixing asked.

"Because I know who Old Sabre Honcho really is," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Who?" Sikong Zhaixing asked.

"Wooden Taoist," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Sikong Zhaixing was shocked, and so was everyone else there.

After a long time, Tie Jian slowly shook his head and said, "No, it can't be him."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Tie Jian replied, "Many years ago he could have become Wudang Sect Leader, but he gave the Sect Leader position to his Shidi [martial (younger) brother] Mei Zhenren. From this, it can be seen that he did not regard fame and profit, power and position as important at all; how could he do such thing?"

"At first I did not believe it either," Lu Xiaofeng said, "At first I also wanted to pull him into the Eagle's nest."

"Could it be that someone opposed?" Tie Jian asked.

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. "Shi Yan opposed," he said, "Hua Manlou also disapproved."

"Why?" Tie Jian asked.

This time he asked Hua Manlou.

Hua Manlou hesitated, and then he said slowly, "At that time I did not suspect him at all, I just felt that he was too close to Ancient Pine Hermit; it would be very difficult for him to keep secret from Ancient Pine."

"Did you suspect Ancient Pine?" Tie Jian asked.

Hua Manlou said, "His martial art skill is extremely high, but about his school and family history, there has never been anybody with any knowledge of it."

"He is a hermit," Tie Jian said, "Hermits are usually like that."

Hua Manlou said, "Before becoming a hermit, one ought to have a past, but he did not. It was as if as soon as he was born he has already become a hermit."

"Why did Shi Yan oppose Wooden Taoist?" Tie Jian hesitantly asked.

"Because he knew that Wooden Taoist did not yield to Mei Zhenren willingly," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Tie Jian frowned, "Could it be that he was just like Shi He, that he did something contrary to the religious rules and hence was forced to step aside?"

"Probably yes," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"What did he do?" Tie Jian asked.

"Shi Yan refused to say," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Family shames must not be spread abroad; no matter what, Wooden Taoist was his martial uncle, plus he was an elder of Wudang, one of the few great Wudang disciples.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "Although Shi Yan is unwilling to explain, but now I can guess more or less what had happened."

Xiao Gu of Mount Ba could not resist asking, "What did Wooden Taoist do in the past that was contrary to the religious rules?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Not only he took a wife on the outside, he also sire a child."

Tie Jian's countenance fell; he said, "Hearsay must not be trusted. This matter concerns his reputation and integrity, it must not be easily trusted even more, and must not be easily spoken out either."

"Yes," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"But since he already spoke out, he must be sure of it," Sikong Zhaixing interrupted.

"Not only he must be sure, he must have evidence," Tie Jian said.

Lu Xiaofeng did not have any evidence.

But his analysis and conclusion, even Grand Master Tie Jian could not not admit that it made a lot of sense.

-- Third Mistress Shen was Ye Lingfeng's wife, yet she gave birth to Old Sabre Honcho's daughter. The one she let down was Ye Lingfeng, not Old Sabre Honcho at all; why did he hate her instead? Moreover, he murdered Ye Lingfeng.

Because Old Sabre Honcho was Wooden Taoist, he was the (older male) cousin of Third Mistress Shen, but also Third Mistress Shen's real husband.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "At that time Wooden Taoist was at the prime of his life, Third Mistress Shen was also a budding beauty ..."

In front of Grand Master Tie Jian, he spoke in a very reserved manner, but his meaning was very clear.

No doubt there was an affair happening between these two [maternal] cousins. But at that time Wooden Taoist was already a prominent Wudang disciple, naturally he could not become husband and wife with her formally and openly.

"Hence he came up with a substituting scheme [orig. the plum tree withers in place of the peach tree], he had Third Mistress Shen marry Ye Lingfeng, and had Ye Lingfeng be the father of his child."

“Why did he pick Ye Lingfeng?”

“Because Ye Lingfeng had trained swordsmanship in Wudang; moreover, it was he who personally trained him. In order to repay the master’s benevolence, the disciple naturally cannot refuse to sacrifice himself.”

But then Wooden Taoist grew old, plus he wandered outside all year long, Third Mistress Shen had nothing to do and was lonely, hence the pretense had turned into reality, she had an affair with Ye Lingfeng.

When Wooden Taoist discovered that she had given birth to a daughter, whom she was not supposed to have, plus he discovered that they were having an affair, it was only natural that he hated them to the bone.

“But he hated Wudang even more, because his disciple Shi He had also suffered similar fate, *i.e.* he was forced to give up the Sect Leader position.”

Originally he put his hope on Shi He, but now all hopes had become a pie in the sky. Therefore, he could only take one path.

‘Revenge’ and ‘power’; either one of these two things was enough to make people go with total abandon, disregarding risk and danger, by hook or by crook, to accomplish it.

“But this is not enough proof that Wooden Taoist is Old Sabre Honcho.”

“I can still enumerate several facts as a proof.”

When the ceremony was in progress, only he could stay and come close to Shi Yan, and only he knew the secret inside the sword hilt.

“There’s great possibility that the secret is concerning why he was forced to step down that year, hence the reason he was determined to get it.”

Concerning Wudang’s internal situation, only he was most familiar with it; hence he was able to arrange safe passage for the people to retreat after the operation was completed. Moreover, he had the authority to keep the crowd of heroes inside the main hall, so that even if they wanted to pursue, they simply were not able to.

Changjing and Changqing were both disciples under his direct supervision, only he could buy them.

Shi He had always been reclusive and arrogant, again, only he would be able to control him.

Although these several points were no more than just speculation, but they were enough to be strung together into clues.

What’s more, Lu Xiaofeng still hold an important link in his hands, “Although I have already known that Cousin is not Gu Feiyun, but all along I was not able to figure out his true identity.”

Tie Jian could not help asking, “And now you have figured it out?”

Lu Xiaofeng nodded, "Cousin is Ancient Pine."

As soon as he said those words, everybody was stunned.

"For the past few years," Lu Xiaofeng continued, "Wooden Taoist and Ancient Pine were as inseparable as form and shadow, they often wandered together and their whereabouts was uncertain; it's because they often had to go back to the Mansion of Spirits."

Xiao Gu of Mount Ba said, "In the big event at Wudang this time, everybody thought Ancient Pine would certainly come, but he just did not show up."

"That's because he has been imprisoned in the cellar of the Ye Family Mansion," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Do you have evidence to prove that he is Ancient Pine?" Tie Jian asked.

"I have seen his hands," Lu Xiaofeng said, "His swordsmanship is not only very fine, it is also very profound; very close to Ancient Pine's swordsmanship. His stature and facial features are even more similar to Ancient Pine's. Just add a little beard, a few strands of grey hair, add a yellowish complexion, he would look exactly the same as Ancient Pine."

Sikong Zhaixing said, "No wonder I always felt that Ancient Pine's appearance is a little mystifying, turns out he never really reveal his true colors to the public."

Tie Jian was deep in thought. He suddenly said, "There is one hole in

your arguments.”

“Which one?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Tie Jian said, “If Wooden Taoist is really Old Sabre Honcho, why didn’t he keep his promise to meet up with you all at the House of Blues?”

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, “It’s because he knew that things had changed, somebody has leaked our secret.”

“Who leaked our secret?” Tie Jian asked.

Lu Xiaofeng let out a bitter laugh, “Without a doubt it’s that extra man who came from the empty sky.”

The extra man was, naturally, that big, tall, majestic looking old man.

Lu Xiaofeng said, “This matter is an absolute secret that is known only to the ten of us, why did you all bring an extra person in?”

Xiao Gu of Mount Ba asked him back, “Do you know who that man is?”

Lu Xiaofeng did not know.

Xiao Gu of Mount Ba said, “Do you know that I have a martial uncle, the Cave Master of the Thirty-Six Caves of Miao [ethnic group of southwest China] Mountain at the edge of Yunnan? He is also a hereditary tribal

chieftain of Miao people.”

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly sprang up. “Are you talking about Long Meng the flying lion?” [Other than a surname, ‘long’ also means dragon, while ‘meng’ means fierce or ferocious.]

Xiao Gu of Mount Ba smiled and said, “He has not set foot on the Central Plains for a long time, no wonder even you did not recognize him.”

“And you let him in into our secret?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Gu of Mount Ba said, “For generations he had been overseeing the southern sky, his nobility is comparable to kings and marquis[1]; in terms of wealth, honor and glory, no one in Jianghu could surpass him. You think he would betray us? He would leak our secret?”

Lu Xiaofeng closed his mouth.

But he finally remembered who this man was; he also remembered why he always had a feeling that he had seen this man somewhere before.

He suddenly felt his mouth tasted sour and bitter, as if he had just eaten a big pot of rotten meat.

Tie Jian said, “Now we only have one way to prove whether your theory is correct.”

"Which way?" Xiao Gu of Mount Ba asked.

Tie Jian said, "Ask Shi Yan to tell us the secret in the sword hilt."

Everybody agreed. "If Wooden Taoist really stepped down because of his affair with Third Mistress Shen, it would also be the proof that he is Old Sabre Honcho."

Tie Jian said, "Even if Shi Yan is reluctant to divulge his elder's private business, under the circumstances, he cannot refuse to speak anymore."

"Has he gone back to Wudang?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"He left before dawn," Tie Jian replied.

"Isn't Wooden Taoist still at Wudang?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Tie Jian said, "We figured as well that there might be people who mean to harm him, hence we have Wang Shidai coming with him."

Xiao Gu of Mount Ba said, "In that case, we must hurry to Wudang and ask him to explain everything clearly."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. He muttered as if he was talking to himself, "I just hope that we won't be too late."

Suddenly there was a voice outside answering him, "Now it is too late."

Wang Shidai sat down first, wiped the perspiration from his face, caught his breath, and then slowly said, "Wudang's thirteenth generation Sect Leader Shi Yan has passed away a moment before noon today, the fourteenth of the fourth month, at the age of forty-seven."

Nobody moved, nobody talked.

Everyone's heart sank. After a long time, someone asked, "How did he die?"

Wang Shidai said, "He had a chronic ailment, and it was very serious."

"What was it?" Tie Jian asked.

Wang Shidai replied, "It was an infection in his liver. Wooden Taoist has already figured out that he only had about a hundred days left of his life."

Lu Xiaofeng was emotionally touched. "So Wooden Taoist examined him?" he asked.

Wang Shidai said, "Wooden Taoist's medical knowledge is quite profound, I also have a bit of medical expertise."

Lu Xiaofeng asked, "In your opinion, did he really die because of his illness?"

"I have no doubt," Wang Shidai replied.

Lu Xiaofeng slowly sat down again, he seemed to be unable to stand.

Tie Jian's countenance looked very heavy as well, "Did he leave any last message, any will as for who would succeed him as Wudang Sect Leader?"

Wang Shidai said, "We originally thought that he would leave any posthumous writing, but found none."

Tie Jian's countenance looked even heavier.

He was well aware that according to Wudang's bylaws, when the Sect Leader died due to particular accident and did not leave any will, the Sect Leader position would be assumed by the most senior person of the School.

And the most senior person in Wudang right now was Wooden Taoist.

Tie Jian heaved a long sigh. "I can't believe that thirty years later, he can still become Wudang Sect Leader," he said.

With a rueful smile Lu Xiaofeng responded, "I am afraid he had already expected it."

In their hearts they all understood that without a definite proof, there was nothing they could do to him.

Wudang Sect Leader was not someone who could be easily offended.

Now that they did not even have the least bit of evidence, even if Wooden Taoist was indeed Old Sabre Honcho, they were powerless to deal with him.

Wang Shidai dejectedly said, "Even though Shi Yan himself knew that his days were numbered, he had never expected that things would happen so suddenly like this."

"He did not even say anything before his death?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"He only said one sentence," Wang Shidai replied.

"What did he say?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Wang Shidai said, "He wanted me to tell you, your guess was not incorrect."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly sprang up, but then he slowly sat back down. "It's no use," he muttered, "Even if my guess was correct, it's no use."

He had asked Shi Yan whether Wooden Taoist was forced to step aside that year because of personal affair.

At that time Shi Yan did not answer. Now he gave his answer, but it was already too late.

The secret inside the sword hilt has, undoubtedly, fallen into the hands of Wooden Taoist, and they had no way of obtaining the evidence.

"Although your guess was not wrong, you did something wrong," Tie Jian said.

"What did I do wrong?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Tie Jian said, "Since you knew that someone was going to snatch the sword away, you shouldn't let Shi Yan kept that secret inside the sword hilt."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "We did what we did, because we wanted to lure him to keep the appointment at the House of Blues, so that we could unmask him there. If the secret in the sword hilt was not the original, he would have seen it right away and would be suspicious."

He sighed again before continuing, "How could we now that at that time the secret has already leaked and he suddenly changed his mind?"

Tie Jian also sighed and said, "No matter who he is, he is really an extraordinary man. Although his plans failed and wiped over the floor, until the last minute he is not defeated yet."

They all sat in silence, feeling very depressed.

Despite the ingenuity and the meticulous plan, they did not expect their operation to fail at the last moment.

"Are we really powerless against him right now?" Xiao Gu of Mount Ba asked no one in particular.

In an uncertain tone Lu Xiaofeng said slowly, "Perhaps I can still think of a way or two."

"What is it?" Xiao Gu of Mount Ba asked.

"Isn't your Shishu [martial uncle] still at Wudang?" Lu Xiaofeng asked him back.

"No, he isn't," Xiao Gu of Mount Ba replied.

"Do you know where he is?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Gu of Mount Ba said, "All I know is the owner of Lucky Plaza is an old friend of his; he butchered a fat cow especially for him to gorge himself. He wouldn't miss this kind of opportunity." [Again, it's a stretch, my tribute to my Singaporean readers. The original was 'quan fu lou', quan – complete, fu – happiness/luck, lou – two-story building.]

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes brightened. "Does he like to eat meat?" he asked.

"Practically he cannot miss one day without eating meat," Xiao Gu of Mount Ba replied.

"Does he eat a lot?" Lu Xiaofeng asked again.

"Like the devil," Xiao Gu of Mount Ba replied.

Fourteenth day of the fourth month, afternoon.

A piece of red paper was pasted on the door of Lucky Plaza, "Closed for the day, private party with distinguished guest."

Although it was closed for business, the door was not closed. As soon as he entered, he saw the big and tall, majestic looking Long Meng, Long the flying lion, eating an entire cow.

Three tables were put together, with a large cauldron full of meat sitting on top of it.

He did not like to eat his meat finely chopped or thinly sliced, or even garnished with anything. When he ate meat, he ate it a large chunk by a large chunk.

In such a big hall, there was only one waiter, who was standing afar off, to serve him. Even the owner was not there. When he ate meat, he did not like to be disturbed, he did not like to talk either.

But he did not ask anybody to stop Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng strode over, dragged a chair, sat down in front of him, and said with a smile, "How are you?"

"Good," Long Meng replied.

"I know you," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I also know you," Long Meng replied, "You are Lu Xiaofeng."

"But I don't know Long Meng," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I just know you."

Long Meng laughed heartily, "Am I not Long Meng?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "You are Tribal Chief Flying Lion, but aren't you also the meat-eating General?"

Long Meng stopped laughing. His pair of big, round eyes shot arrows at Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "General did not die at all, General still eats meat."

"Meat is delicious," Long Meng said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "If Canine Master could disguise you as General, naturally he could also disguise other people the same way. Much less when people die, their appearance will be more or less the same."

"How could General die?" Long Meng said.

"Because I came there," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"You came and General had to die?" Long Meng asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Because General mattered a great deal; other than Old Sabre Honcho, nobody else is allowed to see his real face. The earlier he died, the safer it would be."

"That's right," Long Meng said, "Dead person is always the safest, no one would ever suspect a dead person."

"Too bad lately dead people often came back alive," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Long Meng held out a ladle of meat in front of him; suddenly he asked, "You eat meat?"

"Eat," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Eat a lot?" Long Meng asked.

"Lots," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Good, you eat!" Long Meng said.

He put a ladle of meat inside his mouth first, and then he handed over the wooden ladle to Lu Xiaofeng, "Quickly eat, eat a lot, meat is delicious."

Lu Xiaofeng also scooped out a ladle of meat, "Meat is indeed delicious, extremely delicious; too bad sometimes it is so delicious that it really take someone's life." [Translator's note: play of words here. The phrase I translated as 'extremely' was 要命 – yaoming, lit. wants (someone's) life; it could also mean annoying, desperate, awful, terrible, *etc.* (See also Chapter 9)]?"

Long Meng said, "General eats meat, you also eat meat, everybody eats meat, those who eat meat are not necessarily General."

Lu Xiaofeng concurred.

Long Meng's eyes shone with some kind of weird expression. Suddenly he lowered his voice and said, "Therefore, you can never prove that I am General." He roared in laughter, "Therefore, you can only eat meat."

Lu Xiaofeng wanted to laugh, but he simply could not laugh.

He could only eat meat.

It was indeed a hearty meat stew, but he only took a bit, his countenance immediately changed.

Long Meng laughed and said, "Today you seem to eat slowly, you don't eat much either."

"How much did you eat?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"A lot," Long Meng replied, "Extremely ['yaoming'] a lot." [See my note above.]

Lu Xiaofeng let out a bitter laugh and said, "I am afraid this time it will really take a life."

"Whose life?" Long Meng asked.

"Yours," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

His pressed the table lightly, his body flitted across the table, as fast as lightning he sealed the acupoints around Long Meng's heart.

Too bad he forgot that there was a pot of meat in the middle. A 'life-killing' [yaoming] pot of meat.

General's movement was also very fast. Suddenly he lifted this pot of meat, the meat soup splashed; it was still scalding hot.

Lu Xiaofeng only dodged sideways. "Sit down, don't move!" he shouted.

Naturally Long Meng did not want to listen to him; his body leaped up, he wanted to flee outside.

Not only he did move, he moved very fast, very strenuous.

Hence the poison that had already been hiding inside his stomach and intestine immediately rushed toward his heart.

He fell instantly.

Lu Xiaofeng called out, "There is poison in the meat, as soon as you move ..."

He did not continue, because he had seen that Long Meng could no longer hear him.

This pot of meat really took his life [again, yaoming].

When he went down, his face turned black; and as his face turned black, he had already turned into dead person.

The dead person was no longer Chief Flying Lion; he was not General either.

A dead person is a dead person.

Who cooked this pot of meat? Who was the owner of this place?

The waiter who was standing afar off was so scared that he stood there as if his feet were nailed to the floor. Lu Xiaofeng grabbed him and said, "Take me to the kitchen."

The person cooking the meat ought to be in the kitchen.

But there was only meat in the kitchen; there was nobody there.

A large pot of meat was still cooking on the stove, a very large pot, like the one on Mount Wudang, the large pot that was used to cook a large amount of food. The pot was full with meat that has not been fully cooked.

Lu Xiaofeng's countenance changed again; he could not help wanting to vomit.

He suddenly discovered a very terrifying thing.

-- The meat was inside the pot; could it be that the cook was also inside the pot?

Right now from among those who could still bear witness to Lu Xiaofeng, quite probably only one person left.

It does not matter whether he was Cousin or Ancient Pine, Lu Xiaofeng only hoped that he was still alive.

Where was that man now? Luckily, only Lu Xiaofeng knew.

Naturally the basement of the Ye Family Manor was not the safest place. He had already moved them to a secret place where nobody would ever guess.

-- The game was about to end, this was his last trump card. Naturally he wanted to leave himself a little secret.

Late spring afternoon, the sun was still shining brightly; he walked slowly along the long street, as if he did not have any purpose at all.

All kinds of shops lined up both sides of the street, all kinds of people were inside those shops. He could see them, and they could see him as well, but he did not know how many of those people were actually watching him in secret.

At the end of the street suddenly there was a carriage came galloping and almost knocked him down. There seemed to be someone in the carriage sticking out his head out of the window and gave him a quick glance, he seemed to have a pair of very bright eyes.

If he were able to take a closer look, he was sure he could recognize that person; unfortunately as he looked up, the carriage was already too far.

But even after he left this long street, he seemed to be thinking about those bright eyes still, so much so that he seemed to be troubled by it.

A hurried glance from a stranger, why did he let it troubled him and sent him on edge?

Could it be that the person was not a stranger at all?

He tried hard to chase this matter out of his mind. When he walked past a fruit stand at the corner of the street, he bought two pears. He gave one to a kid who was standing next to the fruit stand and was staring blankly at the distance, and slowly nibbled the one in his hand.

Right now he only wanted to grab Wooden Taoist's fatal point, but didn't Wooden Taoist also want to kill him right now?

The pot of meat just now, although he only had two bites, up to this moment he still felt his stomach was a bit unwell.

Luckily the dose of poison in the meat was not heavy at all. If the dose were too heavy, it would be easier to detect.

Long Meng was not a slow-witted man, it's just that the amount of meat he ate was a bit too much.

Too much that it took his life! [yaoming]

If he also ate a few more pieces of the meat, by this time Wooden Taoist would not have to worry about anything anymore, he himself would not have to worry about anything either.

-- The person behind that carriage window just now seemed to be a woman; the mouth of the horses pulling the carriage was foamy. It seemed like they have been traveling far, and in such haste.

-- Who was she? Where did she come from?

Although Lu Xiaofeng was trying hard not to think about it, he just couldn't keep this matter out of his mind.

He seemed to have a strange premonition in his heart, a feeling that this person was very important to him.

But the person who was really important to him right now was, naturally, not her; it was Ancient Pine.

When the lights went out that day, it was he who personally subdued him; and he had Hai Qikuo and Gao Tao imprisoned in the basement at the back.

Right now all the people who had come from the Mansion of Spirits have been imprisoned in that basement. The first day they went down the mountain, Lu Xiaofeng had already handed the drawing of these people's appearance to the 'waiter who took the dog out for a walk'. The people of the Eagle's nest immediately sprang into action; they caught everybody in one net. And then Canine Master, Sikong Zhaixing and Wang Shidai had their own people disguised to assume their appearance.

Lu Xiaofeng was not overly concerned about their life or death; they would never know 'Old Sabre Honcho's' true identity anyway, they were people who ought to be dead long ago anyway.

But what about 'Cousin'?

Where did he send Cousin? How did he send him out? Practically he did not seem to have any opportunity to bring along such a big, living human being.

Lu Xiaofeng could not help chuckling at himself as he passed through an alley kitty-cornered from the street, leading back to the inn – the inn where they stayed when they first arrived in this town on the eleventh of the fourth month.

They unloaded their luggage first, arranged for a place for the carriage and horses, and then they went out for a drink. It was when they were having a drink that he met his niece, and was subsequently brought to the House of Blues. The horses and the carriage, as well as their luggage, were still in this inn. Even the driver whom they hired along the way was still waiting here for the money.

He seemed to have forgotten about it, and did not remember it until now.

After paying double, he still seemed to feel a bit bad; hence he instructed the driver to harness the horses, "The weather is so good today, I am thinking of taking a tour around this area. Why don't you take me around for the last time, I'll buy you a drink."

The weather was indeed very good, the man driving the carriage, as well as the horses pulling the carriage, were in good spirit, they walked along the street with vigor.

Not only this town was on the road one must follow to go to Wudang, it was also the town closest to Mount Wudang. As soon as they left the

downtown area, the scenery was fresh and green, the world-famous Mount Wudang seemed to be right in front of their eyes.

They stopped in a forest at the foot of the hill. Lu Xiaofeng suddenly remembered that they forgot to bring the wine.

"I promised to buy you a drink." He gave the driver an ingot of silver, "Go buy some. Buy a bit more, you can have the rest."

Naturally this place was quite far from the place that sold wine, but looking at the silver, the driver happily took the money and walked away.

By this time it was already late afternoon, the light of the setting sun filled the sky, the sunset glow was gorgeous. Under the setting sun, this famous Taoist mountain, the wonder place of the Wulin world, looked even more elegant, grand, and wonderful.

It's just that there was no road going up the mountain from here, the Taoist monastery and scenic spots were far away. Therefore, no matter which direction he looked, he did not see a single person. Lu Xiaofeng suddenly crawled under the carriage.

There was nothing to see under the carriage, why did he crawl into it? Could it be he wanted to get some sleep under there?

But he did not close his eyes at all, instead, it looked like he was muttering to himself, "Going hungry for just two, three days, nobody will die of starvation; not to mention hermits usually don't eat too much."

But he did not seem to be mumbling to himself either. Could it be that there was someone else underneath the carriage?

Where is it?

He knocked the baseboard of the carriage, it sounded like the inside was empty. Turned out there was a space between the boards.

When government officials from the Capital announced old age and returned home, they usually brought quite a bit of things, naturally the big carriages they hired would be especially big. If the carriage had a storage room under the baseboard, naturally it would not be small either; putting a person inside would not be a very difficult thing to do.

That day at the Ye Family Mansion, before Liu Qingqing awoke and the others were busy with changing their appearance, he took 'Cousin' and hid him in here.

Although sealing his acupoint and stuffing him into this place was a bit cruel, Lu Xiaofeng thought that some people deserved to be treated like that for their crime.

"Although you have to suffer right now, but as long as you are willing to help me out, I guarantee that I won't give you any trouble; you may continue being a hermit."

He removed the wooden board covering the storage space. Someone fell from the inside.

A living person.

You do not need to check his pulse and breathing to know that the person was still alive.

Because as soon as he fell down, his whole body moved. Not only that, the changes of his movement were quite a lot.

After the person fell, another person fell from the inside, and then another.

Lu Xiaofeng was pretty sure he only hid one person inside, how could it suddenly become three?

All three people were alive, and all three people were moving. Their move was very fast, and the changes were a lot.

The space underneath the carriage was not big, the range of motion was even smaller. With Lu Xiaofeng alone in there, he already felt cramped, and now there were three more people crowding onto him.

His entire body was already unable to move, because these three people, like three octopuses, were pinning him down and were tightly wrapped themselves around him, while five hands simulatenously sealed his acupoints.

How could three people only have five hands? Was it because one of them only had one hand?

Could this one-handed man be Hai Qikuo?

Lu Xiaofeng could not even see their faces, because he was immediately lifted up and heavily thrown into the carriage, just like a dead fish was thrown into a deep fryer.

[1] Kings and marquis – referring to nobility rank in imperial China, namely Wang (king), Gong (duke), Hou (marquis), Bo (count), Zi (viscount) and Nan (baron).

Chapter 17 – Ambushed by the captives

Translated by Foxs

The strong horses let out long neigh and dashed forward.

The three people had sat down, while looking coldly at Lu Xiaofeng. One was Gao Tao, one was Hai Qikuo.

But the third person was not Cousin, it was Du Tiexin.

Lu Xiaofeng was sure he only put Cousin, one person, in the storage hold under the carriage, but now that one particular person was missing instead.

Where did he go?

Where did these three come from? Who was driving the carriage in the front? Was it the driver who was supposed to go to buy some wine?

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly laughed. He wanted to talk, but was unable to.

They sealed his acupoints really hard, the muscles on his face were stiff and numb; not only he was unable to speak, he could not even laugh.

Clearly they did not want to listen to him talking at all, they did not want to see him laugh either. But by the time they wanted him to talk, he simply could not close his mouth.

Du Tiexin stretched out his fingers and then clenched his hands into fists again, his knuckles made cracking noise like a string of firecrackers.

Gao Tao looked at his hands; suddenly he asked, "How many years altogether you were the Hall Master of the Torture Chamber?"

"Nineteen years," Du Tiexin replied.

"Under your hands, was there anybody who dared not to speak the truth?" Gao Tao asked.

"No," Du Tiexin replied.

"I hear that you had many opportunities to become the Zongpiao Bazi [chief, big boss]," Gao Tao continued, "Why didn't you take it?"

"Because Torture Chamber was more interesting," Du Tiexin replied.

"You like to watch people being tortured?" Gao Tao asked.

"That's right," Du Tiexin replied.

Gao Tao laughed, Hai Qikuo also laughed. These two people's laughter sounded like rusty metal grating against each other, making those who heard it felt the root of their teeth ached.

Hai Qikuo said with a laugh, "I really want to see your technique of the

past.”

“You will see it soon,” Gao Tao said.

“Is the Torture Chamber ready?”

Gao Tao nodded.

Hai Qikuo said, “I heard that in the past, the traitors of the Thirty-Six Strongholds would rather go into a deep fryer than going into his Torture Chamber.”

“Absolutely correct,” Gao Tao said.

“Is it true that you have a special method to deal with traitors?” Hai Qikuo asked.

Gao Tao laughed mysteriously, “Not only special, it’s also very fascinating.”

Lu Xiaofeng closed his eyes; he really wished he could close his ears as well, because what he heard was really unpleasant to the ears, but he knew that it was the truth.

Gao Tao suddenly spoke in a sing-song voice, “Entering the Torture Chamber, grieving and heart-broken. Entering the Torture Chamber, crying for dad, crying for mom.” [Translator’s note: the original Chinese rhymes, ‘torture chamber’ – xingtang, ‘heart-broken’ – duanchang, ‘mom’

– niang.]

Hai Qikuo winked; he deliberately asked, "What about exiting the Torture Chamber?"

Gao Tao said, "Exiting the Torture Chamber, see the King of Hell [yan wang]."

"Entering the Torture Chamber is the same as seeing the King of Hell," Du Tiexin coldly said.

"There is the King of Hell in the Torture Chamber?" Gao Tao asked.

"I am the King of Hell," Du Tiexin said.

Suddenly outside the carriage window became dark, even starlight and moonlight were not visible. The rumbling of the carriage's wheels became deafening. The carriage appeared to be driven into a deep cave. It continued traveling in the cave for a short while before coming to a halt.

Gao Tao heaved a deep sigh and said, "We are here."

"Is this the Black-Heart Old Du's Torture Chamber?" Hai Qikuo asked.

Gao Tao cackled hysterically, "This is precisely the Old Yanwang's Yama's Palace."

They lifted Lu Xiaofeng off the carriage and dragged him off like carrying a torn sack; recklessly and without any care. First they banged him against the carriage door, and then they banged him against the mountain wall; they banged him really hard that Lu Xiaofeng's head was dizzy, he even felt that his bones were falling apart.

Gao Tao deliberately sighed and said, "What you have in your hand is a living person, not a torn sack; why don't you be a bit more careful?"

"I can't see," Hai Qikuo replied.

He was not lying; the cave was indeed very dark, they literally could not see the fingers of their own hands.

After walking for a short moment, the path was getting narrower and narrower, the chance of getting banged onto the wall was getting higher and higher.

Right now Lu Xiaofeng himself even felt that he had really turned into a torn sack.

Fortunately, right that moment the mountain wall in front of them made a loud creaking noise and suddenly flipped up, revealing a cave inside. Unexpectedly there was light inside.

Not only it had light, it also had table and chairs. On the table there was a white candle, like the one usually found in funeral hall. The candle was already burnt more than half.

The flame of the candle flickered due to the breeze blowing from a crack on the cave wall, as if it was designed to provide ventilation of this cave.

Hai Qikuo casually tossed Lu Xiaofeng in front of the table. "This is a very good place," he said with a sigh.

Gao Tao said, "Even if there are ten thousand people looking around for three years and six months, they won't find him in here."

With his hook Hai Qikuo tapped Lu Xiaofeng's head. "If they can't find him, who'd save him?" he said.

Gao Tao laughed and said, "Even if he's really crying for dad, crying for mom, no one would come to rescue him."

"In that case, won't he be dead for sure?" Hai Qikuo asked.

"He won't die so fast," Du Tiexin said.

"Why?" Hai Qikuo asked.

Du Tiexin coldly replied, "Because I am going to let him die slowly; very, very slowly!"

"So if he wanted to die a bit faster he can't?" Hai Qikuo asked.

"Definitely not," Du Tiexin replied.

Hai Qikuo laughed. Noticing that Gao Tao was looking down, as if he was studying Lu Xiaofeng's body, he immediately asked, "If you are to do it yourself, which part would you cut first?"

Gao Tao patted Lu Xiaofeng's hand; he said, "Naturally from these two precious fingers."

"If it were me," Hai Qikuo said, "I would start with his two strips of eyebrows."

"Which two?" Gao Tao asked.

"Naturally the ones above his lips," Hai Qikuo replied.

The more they talked, the more they sounded very pleased with themselves, just like butchers discussing a lamb they were about to slaughter.

Lu Xiaofeng has always been an open-minded person, and he had always been very calm under any circumstances, but right now the feeling in his heart was like his entire body was already inside a deep fryer.

It appeared that he was really without the least bit of hope; if he could die a bit faster, it would be good luck indeed.

Who would have thought that at this moment, a cold laugh was heard in the darkness outside.

"Who's there?"

Gao Tao, Hai Qikuo, and Du Tiexin, all three of them quickly rushed out.

These three were first-class martial art experts of Wulin world; not only their reaction quick, their movement fast, they were all veterans of a hundred battles. The number of people who could block their joint attack was indeed not many.

It appeared that the person coming outside sounded was alone. This person practically came to deliver his life.

As soon as they rushed out, they spread out in a fan formation; no matter who this person was, they would never let him walk out of this place alive.

Hai Qikuo was dauntless and violent, the iron hook on his hand was an extremely potent weapon; with 'five nails splitting the mountain' power, he was the first to charge forward.

With one palm protecting his chest, Du Tiexin brandished his right fist, following closely behind him.

There was another cold laugh, suddenly there was a sword flash in the darkness, just like the wrath of a thunder, with the power of lightning. But it was even faster, even more terrifying than lightning.

There was a clear ringing sound, 'Ding!' the hook struck the rock wall, sparks flew everywhere. The hook seemed to carry a severed arm.

Du Tiexin fell backward with his face up, a splash of blood pouring out of his throat like a bubbling spring.

Without even letting out miserable cry these two had breathed their last.

What a fast sword!

The blade of the sword was still flickering in the dark; under the flash of the sword, there seemed to be a shadowy figure.

As soon as Gao Tao saw this person, he withdrew step by step backwards.

His face was completely twisted, just like he saw a malicious spirit suddenly appeared. After a few steps, he dropped down, with tears, nasal mucus, saliva, urine and feces flowed out of his orifices; his entire body crumpled like mud. Unexpectedly he died of extreme fear.

Who could scare him that bad?

Who had such a fast sword?

Was it Ximen Chuixue?

A man slowly came out of the darkness, wearing grey robe and a deep-basket like bamboo rain hat.

It was not Ximen Chuixue, it was Old Sabre Honcho!

Lu Xiaofeng had just come out of a deep fryer, but then he fell into an icehouse; his whole body felt icy-cold.

He wanted to grab this man's fatal point; this man naturally also wanted to take his life!

Even if he would rather enter a deep fryer than the Torture Chamber, but right now he would rather enter the Torture Chamber than fall into Old Sabre Honcho's hands.

To his surprise, Old Sabre Honcho's voice was very gentle, as he asked, "Were they being rude to you?"

Lu Xiaofeng let out a rueful smile.

Because he was banged around so much a moment ago, finally the blood in his vessels was able to flow relatively smoothly, so that right now he was able to speak.

But at this very moment, what could he say?

Old Sabre Honcho said, "No matter what, I can't let you suffer under

their hands; they are not worthy."

Lu Xiaofeng could not resist saying, "I know now, that all along you have been planning on killing them after the operation succeeded."

Old Sabre Honcho did not deny at all, "Wipe them all out, not a single one is allowed to remain," he said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Perhaps the basement of the House of Blues was meant to be their burial ground."

"Lingfeng Mansion is the same thing," Old Sabre Honcho said.

-- Damp and dark basement, the cry of people trying to run for their lives, badly mangled corpses.

Lu Xiaofeng tried hard not to throw up; he said, "They were going to die anyway; even if they did not kill Tie Jian and the others, your plan has not failed."

Old Sabre Honcho chuckled and said, "I have already told you, I won't fail."

Lu Xiaofeng could only concede; it looked like the final victory currently belonged to him indeed.

Old Sabre Honcho said, "It's just like when you are besieging a city; even if you have broken nine layers of wall, even if the blood outside is

flowing like a river, I am still lying down in peace and quiet inside the city wall." He smiled and said, "Because my planning is more thorough than yours. You were able to break nine layers of wall, I have already established the tenth layer. By the time you reached this last layer, your spirit already weary, your strength exhausted; in the end you still fall down outside the city."

"You believe I have no way of exposing your true identity?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Right now there is no one in the world who can vouch for you," Old Sabre Honcho replied, "Tell me, who'd believe you?"

"There is one," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Who?" Old Sabre Honcho asked.

"You," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Old Sabre Honcho laughed heartily.

"Only you know that I am telling the truth," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Therefore, you must kill me to close my mouth."

"What about you?" Old Sabre Honcho said, "Are you absolutely sure that what you think is correct?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I ..."

Old Sabre Honcho said, "I know that you are not absolutely sure either. Unless you can take off my bamboo rain hat and see my face with your own eyes."

Lu Xiaofeng was unable to deny.

"There is one more thing that you are wrong," Old Sabre Honcho said.

"What is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I don't have any thought to kill you at all," Old Sabre Honcho said.

"You don't?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Old Sabre Honcho chuckled again and said, "Why would I want to kill you? What's the difference between you and a dead person anyway?"

He smiled and turned around. As he confidently walked out, he said, "If one is unworthy to be killed by me, I would never do it."

Lu Xiaofeng could not help asking in loud voice, "Now can you show me who you really are?"

Without even looking back, Old Sabre Honcho said, "No."

Candlelight flickered, it was about to go off.

Old Sabre Honcho has left. There was a huge boulder at the entrance of the cave, and it was closed tight. Even if could go freely, he would never leave this place alive.

Right now this place was like a sealed jar, even a fly could not go out.

-- Why would I want to kill you? What's the difference between you and a dead person anyway?

There was none. This sealed jar would be his grave.

Sooner or later everybody would have to enter the grave, it's just that he would prefer to die early than sitting inside the grave, waiting for death.

The sad thing was that even if he wanted to die now, he simply could not die.

The candle was burned completely; wasn't his life just like this candle?

He had never realized that he was not an invincible, an omnipotent superhuman. Until now.

He was always able to get out of previous crises; perhaps that was no more than a bit of luck?

And now that he met Old Sabre Honcho, such a fearsome opponent, his

luck had run out.

-- I know that you are not absolutely sure either. Unless you can see my face with your own eyes.

And now he would never see that face, he could only take this question to the underworld.

-- Would he go to the underworld?

-- Even he himself was not sure. But if he did not go to the underworld, where would he go?

The candle has died, but he was still alive.

In the world, only one thing is worse than sitting in the grave waiting for death; it's waiting for death in the dark.

He recalled a lot of things. A lot of people came into his mind. So much so that he even remembered that pair of bright eyes in the carriage window.

This moment, why did he still think about her?

Could it be that this woman with a pair of bright eyes, who crossed path with him on the street, had some kind of strange and mysterious relationship with him?

The room suddenly became very stuffy; he already started to sweat. Beads of perspiration crawled down his face, just like ants.

Suddenly he discovered that he could move his hands.

-- You have a pair of hands, which is unequalled under the heavens; your two fingers are your priceless treasure.

Everybody said the same thing, but right now the only thing these two fingers could do was to pinch his legs as hard as he could, to keep him awake, to remind him that he was not special at all.

It's just that on the contrary, being awake was more painful.

"It would be better if I could sleep some more."

If by the time he wake up he found himself already in the underworld, wouldn't that be delightful?

He could not sleep.

Along with darkness and stuffiness, came tiredness and hunger and thirst. The thirst was the hardest to endure.

How long would he have to suffer for his sins?

Until he die!

But when would he die?

He suddenly sang loudly; the very same nursery rhyme he had always sung:

"Little girl carrying a clay doll,
Came to the garden to admire the flowers..."

Golden childhood, sweet memories; even the pain of the past has not become very sweet.

Life is so beautiful, why is it that people always wait until they are dying to know and treasure it?

Suddenly there was a rumbling noise as the huge mountain wall opened.

Fire light shone through, followed by a large group of people swarming in. Included among these were Tie Jian, Wang Shidai, and Hua Manlou. At the very front was a white-haired old Taoist. To Lu Xiaofeng's shock, it was none other than Wooden Taoist!

At the death door he was suddenly rescued, it ought to be the happiest moment of his life. But Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt a wave of anger bubbling up in his chest; to everybody's surprise he fainted from anger.

The fifteenth of the fourth month, afternoon.

Late afternoon, almost dusk. The Cloud Room was cool and quiet. Outside the rustling of bamboo sounded like rippling waves. The room was in the Tingzhu Courtyard, where Wudang Sect Leader received distinguished guests.

This time the distinguished guest was Lu Xiaofeng.

He lay on the bed, unmoving, with eyes fixed on the ceiling; he really appeared to be no different to a dead person.

"If it were not for Mu Zhenren[1] remembered a cave like that at the back of the mountain, you'd be really dead this time."

The speaker was Tie Jian, "That was the place Wudang disciples used to use to face the wall and ponder about his misdeeds. But now their rules are not as strict as in the olden days, so that place has been abandoned for quite a long time. This time you are really lucky."

-- Lucky? To he!! with luck!

"But you must not thank only your lucky star, because the one who took us to that place to look for you was precisely Mu Zhenren."

This senior monk from Shaolin did not speak openly, but the implied meaning was clear. Obviously he no longer suspected that Wooden Taoist was Old Sabre Honcho; "Otherwise, why would he take us there to look for you?"

Other people's thought was, naturally, the same. This logic was as simple as 'one plus one equals two'.

Therefore, Wooden Taoist [Mu Daoren, see footnote] has now become Mu Zhenren.

But Lu Xiaofeng understood the real story behind it.

If Wooden Taoist killed him to shut his mouth, even if nobody could prove it, inevitably they would have a bit a suspicion in their hearts.

But now that he saved Lu Xiaofeng, not only it proved that he was not Old Sabre Honcho, he also won everybody's gratitude and respect.

Lu Xiaofeng could only have to admit that it was the most crafty and well-planned scheme he had ever seen in his entire life. Wooden Taoist was indeed the most fearsome opponent he had ever faced.

No doubt it was also the biggest setback Lu Xiaofeng had ever experience in his whole life. Right now he had no choice but to admit defeat.

Although in his heart he understood the truth of the matter very well, he could never tell anybody about it. Because even if he did, nobody would believe him.

Therefore, he only had one question to ask, "How did you know I was in danger?"

"In this case, we only knew that you would never disappear without any rhyme or reason; plus we also found the carriage under a dangerous slope at the back of Mount Wudang. In that carriage we found your outer clothes, with the front part torn; and then there were some traces of a fight on the dirt."

These several points were sufficient to draw a conclusion that he was in danger; therefore, he did not say a word.

Evening slowly came, suddenly there was clear and joyful ringing of the bells outside.

"Today is the grand ceremony of Mu Zhenren formally takes office; no matter what, you ought to go to congratulate him."

Looking at a man who should be punished, but obtaining honor and authority instead, naturally this sort of thing would not make him feel good.

But still he could not absent.

He did not want to shirk this responsibility.

He wanted Wooden Taoist to understand although his defeat this time was bitter, he had not knocked Lu Xiaofeng down.

Even if he did not have any choice but to admit defeat, he wanted to

admit defeat standing up, face to face with his opponent.

The wind blew the bamboo leaves outside, darkness suddenly blanketed mother earth. But in the main hall the lanterns were ablaze.

Under the bright light, the wearing purple and gold Taoist crown, wearing the Seven-Star Sword on his waist, Mu Zhenren looked even more dignified and grand.

The Wooden Taoist of the past, who wandered along windblown dust, who was carefree and uninhibited, basically no longer existed.

Standing here at the moment, was the fourteenth generation Wudang Sect Leader, Mu Zhenren; not someone who could be easily mocked.

Lu Xiaofeng reminded himself that he must not forget this fact.

When his turn came, he tidied up his clothes, went up in big strides, cupped his fist and bowed, "Congratulation Daozhang[2] on reaching the top to this grand position, Lu Xiaofeng came especially to offer his congratulations."

Mu Zhenren smiled and reached out to hold Lu Xiaofeng's arms, "Lu Daxia [great hero] must not be overly courteous," he said.

Lu Xiaofeng also smiled and said, "Daozhang has been through difficult times, finally you have your wish fulfilled. But Lu Xiaofeng is still Lu Xiaofeng, not Lu Daxia."

Although his manner was respectful, the tone of his voice was courteous, his words carried sarcasm as sharp as a needle.

Especially the four words 'have your wish fulfilled'.

He could not resist letting Mu Zhenren know that although he had lost, he was not a fool.

Mu Zhenren said, "Since Lu Xiaofeng is still Lu Xiaofeng, the old Taoist priest is also still an old Taoist priest; hence we are still friends, aren't we?"

Although he was laughing, his eyes also shot a needle-sharp gaze.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt an irresistible force coming from his hands pushing him upwards.

In that instant, the honorable, dignified Wudang Sect Leader ceased to exist; in his place was the dark predator, the haughty, the great strategist, the most ambitious and ruthless character of their generation, the Old Sabre Honcho. It was as if he also wanted Lu Xiaofeng to know, "Even if I let you know who I am, what's the harm in that? What can you do to me?"

His hands were holding on to Lu Xiaofeng's upper arms, between his shoulder and elbow; the upward push suddenly became downward pull. This crushing force would likely result in one of two things – either the bones on both arms were crushed, or he would be forced to kneel down.

Lu Xiaofeng would rather have a hundred bones on his body broken than kneeling down in front of this man.

Fortunately his bones were not broken, because he had already concentrated his 'true strength' on his arms.

Using force to counter force, the weaker force will lose; there was absolutely no leeway to back off quickly.

In martial art, there are many type of techniques used to gain control over the opponent; some use 'chi' to score victory, some use 'strength', some use 'style', some use 'opportunity'. The flexibility and variability of Lu Xiaofeng's martial art skill was really deep and unfathomable; originally he belonged to the last category.

But right now his internal strength has been released; it's just like an arrow on the strung bow, or riding on a tiger's back; it would be too late even if he wanted to withdraw.

Because the opponent's power was indeed too strong; if he withdrew his internal strength, it would be hard to avoid having his body torn and his bones crushed.

'Crack!' the slab of stone on which he stood was crushed, sweats as big as beans started to appear on his face.

The faces of the people standing nearby changed, but they could only watch without being able to do anything.

These two people's strength was opposing each other with equal harshness; if a third party came between them, as long as there was the slightest bit of deviation, there was great possibility that at least one of them would be harmed; there was also great possibility that their power flowing in reverse would cause a lot of damage to themselves.

Who would dare to take such a risk?

Actually, Lu Xiaofeng did not need to take such a risk; in the split second where Mu Zhenren was reversing direction, he had already sensed it. It was his best opportunity to withdraw easily.

But he has withdrawn once, he was unwilling to withdraw again.

At the moment he felt his breathing was getting heavier, his heart was beating faster, so much so that his eyeballs were starting to bulge out.

The only reason he carry on was that he could also see that Wooden Taoist was having a hard time as well.

In this battle, regardless of who would win, the victory would be achieved at a very high price.

Actually, Wooden Taoist did not have to take this risk either; perhaps he did not expect Lu Xiaofeng would have such an unyielding spirit, that he would rather have his bones broken than surrender. Perhaps right now he started to regret too.

Just then, there was a young Taoist from the outside rushing into the

main hall, looking very anxious. If not for an extremely grave matter, he would never dare to intrude to the main hall like this.

Mu Zhenren suddenly laughed and took two steps backward. The thousand-jin load on Lu Xiaofeng's arms suddenly disappeared without a trace; this has caused his body felt like he almost flew up.

He really did not expect that in such situation, his opponent was able to withdraw his internal energy easily like that. It appeared that in this battle he has lost.

He had not completely regulated his breathing, Mu Zhenren was already able to speak. He was asking the young disciple, "What's the matter?"

"Ximen Chuixue is here!"

"Respected guest honors us with his presence, why haven't you invited him up?"

"He insists on carry his sword up the mountain." The young Taoist priest's hands were still shaking, "Disciples were not able to make him shed his sword. Martial (older) brothers who were trying to have him leave his sword at the pond rock were all injured under his sword."

It was indeed a very serious matter; for the last several hundred years, there had never been anybody who dared to make light of Wudang.

"Where is he now?"

"Still at the bank of Shedding-sword Pond, Eighth Martial (younger) Uncle is trying to hold him."

Mu Zhenren's hand already gripped the hilt of his sword.

His hand was slim, dry, and steady; his fingers were long and powerful.

-- If he was holding a suitable sword, would this hand be more terrifying than Ximen Chuixue's hand?

He suddenly walked out in large strides.

Watching him going out, Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt an unspeakable dread in his heart.

He was the only one who had seen this man's sword; if there was someone on earth who would be able to defeat Ximen Chuixue, no doubt this was the man.

The water in the Shedding-sword Pond would be dyed red with blood very soon.

Whose blood?

Lu Xiaofeng did not have any confidence to predict the outcome. He simply could not let Ximen Chuixue die in here. He simply must try to think of a way to stop this battle.

Wooden Taoist had already passed the wide courtyard, he was about to step out of the monastery's main gate. Lu Xiaofeng immediately ran after him.

Outside the Taoist monastery, the beautiful forest was verdant and lush, the spring grass was deep. In the middle of the bushes, there seemed to be a pair of bright, shiny eyes.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart jumped; someone in white coarse mourning clothes suddenly leaped out from the bushes, with an unsheathed sword in her hand, the tip of the sword was aimed at the pit of Mu Zhenren's stomach.

Mu Zhenren's hand was still on the hilt of his sword; he could have easily drew his sword to defeat the assassin, it would have been very easy for him to have her die under his sword.

But for some reason, he did not pull his sword.

Seeing the woman in white coarse mourning attire, he seemed to be suddenly caught off-guard.

In that split second, the sword in the hand of the woman in white, like a viper, has already entered his heart.

He did not fall down right away, he still looked at the woman in shock, as if he still did not believe it really happened.

The expression on his face was not only surprised, but there were also all kinds of unspeakable grief and pain.

"You ... you kill me?"

"You killed my father, naturally I want to kill you!"

"Your father?"

"My father died under your sword, he is the Old Sabre Honcho."

Mu Zhenren's face suddenly twisted; this sentence was like a needle piercing his heart, it was even sharper than the deadly sword stab.

Some kind of unspeakable dread suddenly appeared on his face.

It was not the fear of dying.

He was afraid, because all the inconceivable things in the world, all the inexplicable matters, right this moment suddenly everything had the answer; all the things that he would never believe, in this instant he simply could not refuse to believe.

He suddenly sighed, and then mumbled to himself, "Very good, very good ..."

Those were the last four words he had ever spoken.

And then he fell.

Lu Xiaofeng watched as the sword pierced his heart, he also saw him as he fell; he only felt that his entire body turned icy-cold. Some kind of unspeakable dread also appeared on his face.

Heaven's net has wide meshes, but nothing escapes it [idiom from Laozi].

Unexpectedly there seemed to be a mysterious power really working in the dark, controlling the destiny of mankind. There won't be any person, who ought to be punished, able to escape 'its' justice.

Although this kind of force is invisible, and it cannot be touched, anybody could always feel its presence at any time.

Wooden Taoist's dread was precisely because he had already felt its presence.

Right now Lu Xiaofeng also felt its presence, he was feeling full of awe, and nearly could not stop himself from kneeling down, kneeling in the dark, under the vault of heaven.

Everybody else also seemed to be in shock; it was only after a long time later that the Wudang disciples rushed over to surround the assassin in white.

She immediately shouted, "All of you, backoff, I alone did it, I alone will resolve it."

In the dim light of the night, her pale face appeared incomparably beautiful and stately; just like the goddess of vengeance, "I am Ye Xue, the daughter of Old Sabre Honcho. If anybody thinks that I should not avenge my father, go ahead and kill me."

She suddenly ripped apart the front part of her clothes, revealing sparkling and translucent, spotlessly white, pair of breasts.

But nobody came forward to make their move.

Everybody seemed to be overawed by her divine and stately beauty; most of all Lu Xiaofeng.

Only he knew who her real father was, because –

"Wooden Taoist is Old Sabre Honcho."

But he could not speak; he could not bear to speak, nor was he willing to speak.

-- Besides, even if he did, nobody would believe him anyway.

It was the result of Wooden Taoist's own action, now he reaped the bitter fruit of what he sowed. Although his plan was well thought-out, he did not expect that there was more well thought-out Heaven's net

waiting for him!

"I was supposed to die in the swamp, but I did not die."

She was a cheetah woman, she was far better than anyone in enduring pain and difficulty; she had learned long ago to wait, hence she was able to wait for the best opportunity to strike!

"I did not die, just because the Heavens wanted me to remain alive for revenge." Her voice was cool and calm, "And now my wish has been fulfilled. I won't wait for you to make your move, because ..."

It was only now did she finally look at Lu Xiaofeng. There was some kind of emotion in her eyes, something that no one could explain; it was not grief, nor was it pain. But whoever saw this expression on her eyes, their heart would be broken.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart was already broken.

She raised her head high so that she could give him another look, as if it was her last wish.

Now her wish was fulfilled, she would definitely not wait for anybody else to make their move.

"Because in all my life, there is only one man. Other than he, no one can touch me!"

[1] So far Wooden Taoist was called 'Mu Daoren', here, he was called 'Mu Zhenren'; 'Zhenren' is a term of respect to address Taoist priest, much like 'His Holiness'. I feel awkward to translate this into English, for it literally means 'Wooden Real Man'. As a side note: his martial younger brother, the former Sect Leader of Wudang was 'Mei Zhenren', 'Mei' means plum.

[2] Daozhang is also a term of respect to address a Taoist priest, but in term of rank/respect it is not as high as Zhenren.

Epilogue – The song finished, the people dispersed

Translated by Foxs

The blood that was supposed to flow had already flowed dry, the pond water under the Shedding-word Rock was as clear as before. Mount Wudang was still standing majestically as before; and just as before, it was still admired as the famous mountain of the Taoism, as the holy land of the Wulin world.

The only thing that changed was the people. People were born, people died, there was new, followed by old. Sometimes the transformation between these course of events happened so suddenly.

All the love, all the hatred, all the gratitude and grudges, and all the secrets, were now buried forever along with this sudden change; buried in Lu Xiaofeng's heart.

Right now he only wanted to find a place where he could be alone, where he could quietly pass his days, let those things that had been buried to be buried even deeper.

He was thinking of going down the mountain while the long night has not gone, but he did not expect that someone was waiting for him down the mountain.

A lone figure standing by the Shedding-word Rock, wearing clothes as white as the snow.

Lu Xiaofeng slowly walked over and said, "Now is the time when the song finished, the people dispersed; why are you still here?"

Ximen Chuixue said, "Although the people have dispersed, the song is not yet finished."

"What song are you going to blow?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I followed a trail for eight thousand li just to kill a man," Ximen Chuixue said, "Now this man is not dead yet, I am ready to blow a song to carry him through to his death, using my sword."

"Are you talking about me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Precisely you!" Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Aren't you forgetting that you are not supposed to really kill me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Ximen Chuixue coldly replied, "I only know that Jianghu people have never distinguished between the truth and the false; if you are still alive, that means it's my disgrace."

Lu Xiaofeng stared at him. Suddenly he laughed and said, "Aren't you trying to force me to fight? You want to see whether I can really break your matchless-under-the-heavens sword strike?"

Ximen Chuixue did not deny.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "I know you are dying to know the answer to

this question; I also know that this is the best opportunity for you, but unfortunately you still cannot try it."

"Why?" Ximen Chuixue could not resist asking.

Lu Xiaofeng's smile looked tired and haggard; he said indifferently, "As soon as your sword is unsheathed, you will find out the reason; why do you still ask?"

Was he ready to fight back or evade? Did he really consider life or death, honor or disgrace, even more tasteless than the vast and deep clear water in the Shedding-sword Pond?

Ximen Chuixue stared at him for a long, long time. The fog started to rise from the pond, suddenly he turned around and walked into the fog.

"Why don't you make your move?" Lu Xiaofeng called out.

Ximen Chuixue did not even look back, he simply said coldly, "Because your heart is dead, you are already a dead man!"

"Is my heart really dead?" Lu Xiaofeng asked himself, "Am I really like the dead who can't accomplish anything anymore?"

These questions, only he knew the answer as well.

The morning fog was dreary and hazy, but light has started to illuminate the eastern horizon. He suddenly puffed out his chest and

walked in large strides toward the light.

Lu Xiaofeng Book 6: The Phoenix Dances in the Nine Heavens

[凤舞九天 Fengwu Jiutian]

By Gu Long

Translated by Foxs

Chapter 1 – Thin Blade

A hundred and three astute, capable and experienced Wulin [martial art world] martial art masters, plus thirty-five million taels worth of gold, pearls and jewels, unexpectedly all mysteriously disappeared in one night.

The repercussion of this matter reached far and wide, not only it affected the honor and disgrace, as well as the survival, of Central Plains' thirteen biggest escort agencies, there were at least seventy or eighty distinguished men that very soon would have their families bankrupt, ruined and have their reputation swept away.

What had actually happened that night?

In this whole wide world, only one person knew this secret!

If Cui Cheng knew that now he had become this important, certainly he would have felt that his life was not in vain.

But he did not know at all. He has been unconscious for three whole days.

These hundred and three men were the elite warriors of the Central Plains' escort agencies; they were escorting the biggest shipment since the beginning of history. From Taihang, out of Tongguan, but suddenly

disappeared in a small town at the foot of Taihang Mountains [on the border of Hebei and Shanxi].

Cui Cheng was a helper[1] during the trip of these escort agencies' warriors; he was also the only survivor in this particular incident.

According to Xiong Tianjian, the head of search party team, which was sent out a day after the emergency call, "We found him holed up in a local inn, he was already unconscious and was dying."

According to Ye Xingshi, a famous doctor who accompanied the search team to Taihang, "He has on his body a total of six saber cuts. Although he is unconscious due to excessive bleeding, fortunately his injury is not life-threatening; as long as we can find a safe place for him to recuperate three to five days, I guarantee he will recover and be awake."

According to Ying Yan Laoqi [lit. Hawk Eye the seventh], "Right now he has been taken to an absolutely safe place to recuperate, without our approval, even a housefly cannot fly in."

Xiong Tianjian was a hero of the Central Plains, he also happened to be the maternal uncle of Situ Gang, the Zongbiaotou [Head Escort] of the Qunying [lit. crowd of warriors] Escort Agency. He was chivalrous and upright, people of Jianghu [lit. rivers and lakes, martial art community] had always looked up to him.

Ye Xingshi was the sole lay disciple of Tiejian Dashi [lit. (grand) master (usually Buddhist) iron shoulder] of Shaolin, also one of the four famous doctors who had enjoyed flourishing reputation in Jianghu for a long time. His medical expertise was publicly known throughout the land

under the heavens.

Ying Yan Laoqi was the Zongpiaobazi [head honcho/big boss] of the Twelve-Dock Alliance. Twelve-Dock Alliance's influence reached far beyond the Great Wall, even in both 'black and white' ways [referring to criminal/underground and legitimate worlds] there were disciples and subordinates of his. In the escort job this time, among the forty or so escort warriors, there were at least five or six men that were either his disciples or had been working under him in the past.

They were incriminated in this matter just because they were the guarantors of the thirteen escort agencies.

The origin of this escort job was indeed not a small matter, so much so that even the power that he had heard about it. If they could not find it back, not only all guarantors would be difficult to escape from criminal charge, even the Taiping Wangfu [prince's mansion] who entrusted this escort job to them would not be able to avoid responsibility.

Naturally all guarantors were public figures with high standing in Jianghu. Among the members of the nine big clans [bang] and seven big sects [pai] of the wulin world of Central Plains, nearly each one had people who were involved in this matter.

The day they found Cui Cheng was a day before the Duanyang [dragon boat festival, fifth day of the fifth month of lunar calendar], and today was the eighth of the fifth month.

According to Cheng Zhaizhu [lit. stronghold/fort's master], the leader of the third stronghold of the Twelve-Dock Alliance, who was responsible for

taking care of Cui Cheng, "Last night he has been waking up once, drank half a bowl of ginseng soup, and defecated once. After we replaced his medication, he went back to sleep."

According to Xiao Hongzhu, a concubine of Ying Yan Laoqi, "There is already no trace of blood in his stool, this morning he was already able to talk, asking for water to drink, and when he saw me he smiled."

Cheng Zhong and Xiao Hongzhu were Ying Yan Laoqi's most trusted people, they were the only ones who could get close to Cui Cheng.

Based on the condition of Cui Cheng's injury, although now was not the right time to tire him, but this matter was a lot more important than his well-being; as long as he could talk, they could not afford to wait any longer.

Therefore, right now, everybody who had any connection in this matter had already arrived at the Twelve-Dock Alliance headquarter, even Taiping Wang's [king/prince of Taiping] heir apparent, accompanied by his personal guards, had come.

Of course now Cui Cheng must not die!

Almost no one in Jianghu has ever truly understood what kind of place this Twelve-Dock Alliance was. Actually, it was not only a place, but an enormous organization.

This organization's power spread over a vast region, its structure was very complex, they even had influence in both black and white ways; but

all of them had always adhered strictly to one principle:

“Do not offend Heaven and reason; do not take advantage of people in danger; do not bully the elderly, women and children; do not harm the poor, the sick, widows and orphans.”

This was perhaps the biggest reason why they could exist thus far.

The Twelve-Dock Alliance had twelve strongholds, from the outside they did not look any different than ordinary village or mansion, while in fact their security was extremely tight, their organization was even more structured; without any badge [orig. 'tablet/medal hanging on the waist'] and password, nobody, no matter who, would find it difficult to enter their mountain area.

The Zongpiaobazi Ying Yan Laoqi's headquarter was called 'Ying Yan' [Hawk Eye], the operation of, as well as commands to, the Twelve-Dock Alliance's subordinates were directly controlled and issued from this 'Hawk Eye'.

By Duanyang day, at noon, Cui Cheng had already been delivered to a secret chamber inside the 'Hawk Eye'. To enter this secret room, one must go through five heavily guarded iron gates. Only Cheng Zhong and Xiao Hongzhu had free access to this room. Right now the two of them happened to be in the room to accompany Cui Cheng.

Cheng Zhong was experienced and knowledgeable, plus he had some medical expertise. Xiao Hongzhu was gentle and soft, as well as smart and meticulous. All four sides of the secret chamber were walls, not ordinary walls, but blocks of granite. Not only the iron door was heavily

guarded around the clock, the lock was large iron lock specially manufactured by a famous craftsman. Other than with the two keys kept inside the inner pocket of Xiao Hongzhu and Ying Yan Laoqi, two people, nobody else would be able to open the door.

This kind of security, even Prince Taiping's Heir Apparent could not feel dissatisfied; he laughed and said to Ying Yan Laoqi, "You were right, even a housefly cannot fly into this place."

However, after passing through five iron gates and entering the secret chamber, they discovered that Cui Cheng had already died!

Xiao Hongzhu and Cheng Zhong were also dead!

There was no scar nor any trace of blood on their bodies, yet the bodies were ice-cold and stiff.

According to Ye Xingshi's observation, "They had died at least for an hour, they were killed by a very thin and fast blade; one stab and their lives were gone!"

"Because the blade was extremely thin, the movement was extremely fast, it did not even leave any wound."

"Undoubtedly the fatal stab went into the lower end of the lung. The blade penetrated in, immediately the blood burst into the thoracic cavity; therefore, no blood flowed outside."

What an accurate blade, what a fast blade!

Obviously not only the murderer was an expert in fast blade, he must have had a very rich experience.

The people who guarded the secret chamber have been working under Ying Yan Laoqi for ten years or more; they all were his extremely trusted aides.

They pointed to the sky and swear by the sun, "Within the last four hours, other than Madame Xiao and Cheng Zhaizhu, definitely there was not a third person coming in and out."

There were thirty-six men on guard duty; thirty-six men all said the same thing, definitely it was not a lie.

In that case, how did the murderer come in?

With a cold laugh Prince Taiping's Heir Apparent said, "Based on what you said, he must be an invisible man!"

High noon.

The exquisitely-decorated main hall was oppressively warm, even the breeze had seemingly refused to blow, the messy hair drooped down from their heads, as if it was glued together by perspiration. Although there was a continuous supply of drinks, everybody still felt their lips parched, their mouths tasted bitter.

Ying Yan Laoqi looked even more haggard, he looked sad and weary.

Originally he was a vibrant person, someone who appeared to be very young. But in this short moment, he seemed to have aged a lot.

"How did the murderer get in? There is no such thing as an invisible man in the world."

He did not understand. In fact, nobody did.

They all only knew one thing: if they could not recover this thirty-five million taels worth of escorted goods, they would have to compensate.

It was enough to make each and every one of them to lose their family fortune! Even after losing their family fortune, they might not necessarily be able to compensate in full!

Based on their status and reputation, naturally they must not renege on a debt.

Fortunately, Prince Taiping's Heir Apparent was not an unreasonable man at all, "I may give you a forty-day deadline, to let you recover these jewels, otherwise ..."

He did not continue, but he did not need to. The serious consequences, everybody understood clearly in their hearts.

Finished speaking, he took his personal guards and left. No matter

what, forty-day deadline cannot be considered short.

It's just too bad that in this matter they did not have the least bit of clue.

Ying Yan Laoqi stood up and sat back down. He sat down and stood back up. Xiong Tianjian was sweating all over, three layers of his clothes, inside and outside, were drenched. For some people, when they were sweating, only their nose was wet; drops of sweat were trickling down from the tip of their noses.

All these people were great wulin warriors who were the leader of their respective regions, normally they gave orders and made decisions at will, yet this moment they were all at a loss, unexpectedly nobody was able to come up with the least bit of idea on how to deal with this situation.

Ye Xingshi suddenly said, "This is not the first time."

Nobody understood what he was talking about; they could only wait for him to continue.

Ye Xingshi said, "End of last month, Changjiang Sui Shang Fei [flying over the Yangtze River] suddenly died under water during one his routine daily patrols. I was invited by his Clan's disciples to help determining the cause of his death."

Xiong Tianjian immediately asked, "The cause of his death is the same as Cui Cheng's?"

Ye Xingshi nodded. He said, "His body was completely without scar or bloodstain. I spent three whole days before finding out the blade cut at the bottom of his lung. Same thing, one stab is all it takes to take his life!"

"He was stabbed under water?" Xiong Tianjian asked.

"Correct," Ye Xingshi replied.

Xiong Tianjian's countenance turned even heavier. Sui Shang Fei's water skill was known to be the first under the heavens. The assailant was able to stab his vital point under water, his water skill must be even more exquisite than Sui Shang Fei's.

He was deep in thought for a long time before finally said slowly, "I also remembered something."

"What is it?" Wang Yi, the young master of the family head of Huainan wulin community, whose eagle-claw power was widely known, quickly asked.

Xiong Tianjian said, "At the beginning of this year, when the old master of Iron Sword Manor in Song Yang was training his sword in a secret sword room, he died suddenly, and until today nobody knew the cause of his death."

He heaved a deep sigh, "Only now that I thought about it, there is a good chance that he was murdered by the same assailant!"

Song Yang's Guo Family's sword technique has always been passed on

in secret. When the Old Manor Master Guo practiced his sword, he would never allow any outsiders to peek.

His secret sword room was built just like 'copper wall, iron bastion', no matter who, it would be difficult to come close even for one step. Much less his swordsmanship was superb, when he was unleashing the Iron Sword technique handed down in his family for generations, absolutely nobody would be able to get close to him.

Knitting his brows, Ye Xingshi said, "If he really was stabbed to death when practicing the sword, the assassin's blade is indeed too frightening."

Suddenly Ying Yan Laoqi let out a cold laugh and said, "In that case, shouldn't we just sit here and wait for him to come and kill us all one by one?"

Nobody argued with him, his most beloved woman had just been assassinated, no matter who would not be in a good mood.

Ying Yan Laoqi clenched his fists, the blue veins on his forehead were bulging as he said in a loud voice, "Even if this assassin really has three heads and six arms, really is an invisible man, I am going to find him!"

Question is: how would he find him?

After thorough deliberation, everybody finally agreed on three countermeasures for dealing with this situation. The available manpower would be divided into three groups, and each group would separately

handle one task.

The first group, under Xiong Tianjian's leadership, would return to the little town at the foot of Mount Taihang, to investigate the inn where the escort warriors spent the night, to see if there was any 'spider thread and horse track' remained. Their main task was to carefully question every local house and family, to see if by any chance they saw any suspicious stranger visited the place within a few days before the incident.

They also made a list of wulin experts, who were adept at using blades, and the second team under Ye Xingshi's leadership was tasked to investigate. The most important task was to find out between the early morning of the fifth month's Duanyang until noon that day, a period of four hours, where were these people?

The third group was led by Wang Yi; they were to go everywhere to raise funds, to find a way to scrape together thirty-five million taels.

These things were obviously very difficult to do; they all could not refrain from asking Ying Yan Laoqi, "And what are you going to do?"

"I am going to look for Lu Xiaofeng."

"You mean the Four Eyebrows Lu Xiaofeng?"

Ying Yan Laoqi nodded, "If there is anybody in this world who could find that assassin for us, it must be Lu Xiaofeng."

He spoke with confidence. After going through the case of the Mansion

of Spirits, he had full confidence of Lu Xiaofeng's resourcefulness and capability.

"I hear that this man is a wanderer, he roams about to the other end of the world, regarding all four corners of the world as home. Where are you going to look for him?"

"Where there is the best zongzi[2], that is where I am going to go to look for him."

About this little fact, he was also very confident.

He knew that not only Lu Xiaofeng loved to eat, Lu Xiaofeng also knew how to eat. If he did not eat zongzi during the Dragon Boat Festival, wouldn't it be like 'damaging beautiful scenery'?

Rumor has it that the owner of Wo Yun Lou [Crouching Cloud Building ('lou' usually refer to two-story building)] employed a master chef whose Huzhou zongzi was exceptionally good, that each year local authorities always sent some to the Capital via urgent courier using 'eight-hundred li fast horse'. Plus, he also heard that the owner of Crouching Cloud Building was an old friend of Lu Xiaofeng's.

"I am going there." Ying Yan Laoqi stood up, "The master of Crouching Cloud Building has always been hospitable. Duanyang was only three days ago; he can't possibly let Lu Xiaofeng go yet."

Too bad he was still one step too late.

In the old days, the master of Crouching Cloud Building was widely known in Jianghu as a handsome man; presumably because for the past few years he had eaten too much of a good food, his belly was gradually bulging outward. No doubt that this fact had been disturbing him very much; therefore, while talking, he would often unconsciously pat his own belly.

"Lu Xiaofeng indeed came here. Almost every year before and after Duanyang he would stay for a few days."

The master of Crouching Cloud Building personally accompanied Ying Yan Laoqi drinking wine. "This is the Green Bamboo Leaf wine that I picked especially for him; what do you think?"

Although Ying Yan Laoqi did not come to drink wine, he still downed the cup of wine in one gulp. "And now where is he?" he immediately asked.

The master of Crouching Cloud Building sighed and said, "It seems to me that this year his mood is not as good as in previous years. He seemed to be a little preoccupied; without even finishing this jar of wine, he insisted on leaving. Even I can't hold him back!"

Apparently he was very concerned over Lu Xiaofeng. Shaking his head, he sighed again before saying, "He always meddled with everybody's business, even when he ought not to meddle he still loved to meddle, but he always forget about his own business. When a man reached the age of thirty and has not settled down and got married, how could his mood be good?"

Ying Yan Laoqi could only laugh wryly. Then he asked, "Do you happen to know where he is heading?"

The master of Crouching Cloud Building thought for a moment before saying, "I think I heard him saying that he wanted to go to the sea to relieve his boredom."

Instantly Ying Yan Laoqi's countenance turned yellowish like a candle, "Did you say he is going out to sea?"

The master of Crouching Cloud Building looked out the window toward a distant white cloud; he said slowly, "I think by this time he is already out at sea."

Ying Yan Laoqi picked up his wine and started drinking. In one breath he drank eight big bowls of wine, and then he stood up and left.

The master of Crouching Cloud Building did not try to hold him back; he only walked him off to the door. "He might return late autumn, and he always comes here to eat my moon cake. If you have anything, I can pass it on to him."

"By that time," Ying Yan Laoqi said, "I'll only have one thing I want him to do."

"What is it?" the master of Crouching Cloud Building asked.

"I want him to carry a coffin," Ying Yan Laoqi replied.

The master of Crouching Cloud Building knitted his brows, "Whose coffin?" he asked.

Ying Yan Laoqi replied, "Mine."

[1] Orig. 'tang zi shou', a helper who acted as a herald in front of the traveling party.

[2] Zongzi - glutinous rice and choice of filling wrapped in bamboo leaves and boiled.

Chapter 2 – Fox Den

Lu Xiaofeng had not gone out to sea, he was afraid of seasickness, he picked the largest and the most stable ship, and right now the ship was being loaded.

The captain of the ship had received his five hundred taels of silver, a sly old fox, his eloquence was especially good!

“The more goods on the ship, the more stable it will be. Even if you have never been out to sea, you won’t be seasick. You are not in a hurry anyway, so what is two more days of wait?”

With his full-of-calluses hand, he whacked Lu Xiaofeng’s shoulder. “I may take you to a good place. When you get there, perhaps you won’t want to leave.”

Lu Xiaofeng could not bear not to ask, “What’s in that place?”

Squinting his eyes, the Old Fox looked at him, “As long as you can think about it, that place has it.”

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, “That place, did you or did you not open it?”

The Old Fox also laugh, a big hearty laugh, he said, “You are a smart person. That’s why when I first saw you, I have already liked you.”

Naturally it was he who opened that place, that's why it was called 'The Fox Den'.

And so Lu Xiaofeng was waiting in 'The Fox Den' for him to finish loading the ship. He had already been waiting for three whole days.

In people's mind, fox is the most intelligent, cunning animal, but very selfish; therefore, their den ought to be a bit more comfortable than other animal's.

Actually, it was a fact.

People who spent their lives on the sea all year long, as soon as they heard 'the Fox Den', three words, their face would reveal a mysterious smile, their heart might be burning hot, as if they had just drank a cup of strong liquor.

Whatever men could think of, they could find it at the Fox Den.

The things that men could think, usually are not good things.

There were altogether more than twenty rooms constructed with wooden-board walls. The four bungalows at the front were comparatively bigger than the rest, they could be considered front lobbies.

Although the rooms were shabby, nobody cared. People came here not to look at the building.

Warm and humid breeze was blowing from the window facing the sea, carrying with it a kind of pleasant saltiness, just like the old Papa's sweat.

The room was foggy with smoke, the wood shavings oil fragrance on the women's hair mixed with the smell of broiled fish, enough to arouse all kinds of desire in the men's hearts.

Everybody was gambling very hard, they were also drinking very hard, those who were there for women looked even more like hungry tigers.

Except for one person.

He was still very young, with a dark and handsome face. There was a bit of haughtiness, but also a bit of feral air; his eyes black, his hair dark blue, his thin lips appeared strong and cruel.

At first the women were very interested in him, but very soon they discovered that although his appearance was like a vigorous leopard, he was actually as cold as a block of ice.

As soon as Lu Xiaofeng walked in, he saw him; he was peeling the shell of a hard-boiled egg.

He only ate hard-boiled egg, and drank only plain water.

Lu Xiaofeng did not blame him at all, both of them came from the same background. Lu Xiaofeng had personally experienced how in a short period of half a day he almost delivered his life three times. If not for his exceptionally fast reaction, by now he had died three times.

Naturally he could not be not especially careful.

A very young-looking girl with well-endowed chest and very slim waist passed by him, carrying a tray with a bowl of beef soup on it. With eyes brimming with passion, she said gently, "Beef are hard to come by in this place; eat some."

Without looking at her, he simply shook his head.

She was still unwilling to give up, "I am giving this to you, no need to pay, you have no choice but to eat it."

It looked like she may be young, but her experience in dealing with men was not shallow. Suddenly a very professional-looking enchanting smile appeared on her face. With two fingers, which cannot be considered ugly at all, she picked up a piece of beef and stuffed it onto his mouth.

Lu Xiaofeng immediately knew that it was a bad move. Dealing with this youngster, she simply could not use the technique she used to deal with other men.

He had just had this thought when the whole tray of beef had covered her face.

The beef was still hot, the soup was dripping on her erect breasts, just like a volcano discharging smoke.

The men in the room roared in laughter, some yelled, but the girl burst into tears.

The young man was still sitting coldly, all along he did not even cast a single glance toward her.

Two strong-looking men, with face full of water rust, obviously wanted to come to the aid of this damsel in distress; but then perhaps they were driven by 30% drunkenness.

Lu Xiaofeng also knew that things would turn bad. And just like last time, as soon as he had that thought, those two walrus-like big men already flew out; one flew straight out the window and landed heavily on the ground, while it seems like the other was about to crash onto Lu Xiaofeng's table.

Lu Xiaofeng lightly stretched out his hand to push, sending this man also flying out of the window.

Finally the young man raised his head and shot him a cold look. Lu Xiaofeng smiled; he was thinking of walking over to eat eggs with him when the young man's countenance fell and he started to peel the second egg's shell.

Lu Xiaofeng has always been easy to make friends, but toward this young man, it seemed as if he was bumping into a wall; there was not the least bit of response.

Undoubtedly, Lu Xiaofeng himself was a man who could arouse

women's interest. As soon as he found a seat, two women dressed like 'swaying flowering branches' came over. The wood shavings oil on their heads emitted strong fragrance, so strong that it made people sick.

It's just that Lu Xiaofeng has always been a gentleman; a gentleman would never make a woman feel bad about herself.

However, he did not wish to smell the wood shavings oil mixed with wine either. He only need to 'graft flowers onto a tree', by changing the subject, "Who was that girl?"

"There are several dozen girls in that place; how do I know which one you are asking about?"

"The one who got beef soup on her face."

After paying a little bit of 'hush up money', those two women with wood shavings oil were replaced by the one with beef soup on her face. Obviously there was no more beef soup on her face, but there was no smile either. Toward this man, whose moustache looked like a pair of eyebrows, apparently she did not have too much interest.

Fortunately, Lu Xiaofeng's interest was not on her either. After several sentences of as meaningless as the ones he talked with the two wood shavings oil women, Lu Xiaofeng finally brought the conversation to his topic of interest.

"Who is that young guy who ate hard-boiled eggs? What's his surname? What's his given name?"

According to the inn's register, the young man's name was Yue Yang, the 'yue' [peak] of 'shan yue' [mountain peak], the 'yang' [ocean] of 'hai yang' [also 'ocean'].

"I wish he would choke to death by the eggs." This was her final conclusion about the young man.

Unfortunately, for the time being he would not choke to death, because right now he was not eating boiled eggs anymore. He stood up and was ready to go.

Right this moment, suddenly there was 'crack' sound from the window, a row of nine cross-bow arrows flew in, straight toward his back.

The sound of arrows splitting the air was very intense, naturally the power behind the arrows was very strong.

Lu Xiaofeng was drinking, two of his fingers flicked, the cup in his hand flew out, one cup suddenly shattered into six, seven pieces; all pieces happened to strike the arrows, one piece of wine cup fragment knocked one arrow down.

A series of 'ding, ding, ding' was heard, seven arrows fell to the floor. Naturally the remaining two arrows were not able to harm the young man either.

Like an arrow Lu Xiaofeng also shot out, in fact, he was even faster than an arrow. But when he was outside the window, he did not even see a

shadow. When he got back, the young man Yue Yang was also gone.

"He's gone back to his room to sleep. He slept very early every day." The one who talked was the girl whose face did not have any beef soup. She seemed to have a sudden interest toward Lu Xiaofeng.

Young girls, how many of them did not adore a hero?

She looked at Lu Xiaofeng, there was passion in her eyes. Suddenly she asked in tender voice, "Do you want to eat beef?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed; he also lowered his voice as he said softly, "I want to go to sleep too."

The more than twenty rooms at the back were even worn out, but people who came here did not care.

For these men, who drifted in the sea all year round, as long as there is a bed, it is enough.

Niuroutang [lit. beef soup] pulled Lu Xiaofeng's hand. "My (maternal) grandmother often said, to win a man's heart, the fastest route is through his stomach." She sighed, "But why is it that the two of you did not have any interest, even toward food?"

"It's because I am afraid to get fat."

They stopped in front of a room. She did not open the door though.

Lu Xiaofeng could not bear not to ask, "We are not coming in?"

"Right now there are still people inside, we must wait a while." With contempt on her face, she continued, "But these men are just like hungry dogs, we won't have to wait long."

Naturally using the bed that had just been used by a hungry dog gnawing a bone won't feel good.

Lu Xiaofeng was ready to leave, but then she told him that that Yue Yang's room was exactly next door, he immediately changed his mind.

He was very interested in that young man; this young man's style was almost the same as his own when he was young. The only difference was that he would never shove a tray of beef onto a girl's face.

Sure enough, very soon afterwards the door opened, a big burly man that looked like an orangutan, followed by a girl that looked like a chick, came out.

Funny thing is, the chick looked fresh and alive, with springs in her steps, while the orangutan looked like his legs had turned to jelly.

The two girls giggled and secretly exchanged winks.

"Those things above your mouth, are they eyebrows? Or moustache?" The chick looked like she was having a strong urge to touch his face.

Lu Xiaofeng hurriedly pushed her hand. Suddenly they heard 'bang!' the door of the next room was pushed open, followed by 'smack' something was thrown heavily to the ground. To everybody's shock, it was a viper.

The girls screamed and ran away. Lu Xiaofeng flew over. He saw Yue Yang stood on the doorway, his countenance was a bit pale.

The quilt on the bed was raised; obviously he had just snatched the viper away from inside the quilt.

This was the fifth time someone was trying to take his life.

Lu Xiaofeng could not help sighing. "What did you do exactly?" he asked, "Did you rob someone's rice bowl? Or did you steal someone's wife?"

Yue Yang looked at him coldly, while still standing on the doorway, as if he was determined not to let him in.

Lu Xiaofeng was also standing at the door, determined not to let him shut it. "Others want to take your life, you don't care at all?"

Yue Yang still looked at him coldly, he did not open his mouth.

Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Don't you want to know who are the people who plot against you?"

Yue Yang suddenly said, "I only care about one thing."

Lu Xiaofeng asked, "What is it?"

Yue Yang replied, "If there is someone who likes to meddle in my business, I really want to deal with him so that in the future he won't be able to meddle in other people's business forever."

Suddenly he made his move, as if he wanted to slice Lu Xiaofeng's throat, but then his hand turned and his fingertips already reached the space between Lu Xiaofeng's eyebrows. Lu Xiaofeng only sidestepped, and was forced to take a half step back, 'bang!' the door was shut.

And then there was another 'bang!' inside the room. It seemed that he also closed the window.

Lu Xiaofeng stood in front of the door, while staring blankly for half a day. Suddenly he turned around, picked the dead snake from the ground, and examined it carefully for half a day under the lantern hanging on the corridor, before he finally put it down gently on the ground again.

Seven inches of the snake was broken, it was pinched by two fingers. This type of snake was not only unusually poisonous, the skin was extremely hard, ordinary blade may not necessarily able to cut it off. This young man's two-finger skill was unexpectedly similar to Lu Xiaofeng's.

Lu Xiaofeng could only smiled wryly, "Fortunately he is also approximately twenty, otherwise, won't others think that he is my son?"

Perhaps he himself thought that this young man was his son.

Finally the night arrived.

Just now someone was knocking on his door. Lu Xiaofeng pretended to be asleep. After a long time knocking, finally he heard that passionate little girl gave a hateful kick on the door, and with a hateful voice said, "Turns out these two men are dead men." And then her footsteps died away.

Right now the only noise left outside was the sound of the waves lapping the beach; from the opposite room came the sound of a man's snoring, from the room on the left came the sound of a woman gasping for breath, from the room on the right, where Yue Yang stayed, however, not the least bit of sound was heard.

Not only this young man had a very high martial art skill, the way he moved was also very strange; not only his movement was weird, his temperament was even more weird.

Actually, what was his background? Why did those people want to kill him?

Lu Xiaofeng's interest was greatly aroused, even sleep had left him.

For people who can't sleep, it is very easy to feel hungry; he suddenly discovered that he was hungry as hell.

Although the night was deep, in this kind of place, there would always be the possibility of finding something to eat. Who would have thought that his door was locked by the Beef Soup. Fortunately the room still had window.

Such a warm weather, naturally he would not want to sleep with closed window like the young man next door.

Since there was nobody else in the room, he did not feel like tiptoeing toward the window either. With one turn of his body, he already flew out of the window.

The crescent moon of the early days of the month hung high in the sky, bathing the big waves of the sea with silvery glitter.

Suddenly he realized that someone was crouching outside Yue Yang's window, with something that looked like a red-crowned crane's beak in his hand. The beak of that thing was directed inward; he was blowing something into the room.

Lu Xiaofeng had been roaming the Jianghu since he was a teenager, naturally he knew that the thing that the man was holding was the 'Soul Fragrance Rooster Cry of the Fifth Watch [between 3-5am]' that only the bottom five schools of Jianghu would ever use.

This person also realized that there was someone else; he turned his head, and the moonlight happened to shine on his face.

It was a long and narrow horse face, with an unusually long and big

eagle-beak nose; no matter who, once one sees him, it will be difficult to forget.

Lu Xiaofeng leaped high and pounced at him.

Who would have thought that not only this person's reaction was very fast, his qing gong [lightness skill] was also exceptionally superb. Once his arms flapped, like light smoke he flitted across the roof ridge.

A fifth class little thief, how could he possess such a high level of qing gong?

Lu Xiaofeng did not give this fact a careful consideration, right now he was only worried that Yue Yang had been knocked unconscious by the fragrance.

Yue Yang was not unconscious. When Lu Xiaofeng landed on the ground, he found the window open, Yue Yang was standing at the window, while looking at him coldly.

Someone blew knock-out incense into his window, yet unexpectedly this young man was able to stay calm; he simply waited until the person left and then he opened the window.

Lu Xiaofeng really did not understand what kind of man he is.

Suddenly with a cold laugh Yue Yang said, "I really don't understand what kind of man are you? In the depth of the night, why haven't you slept?"

Lu Xiaofeng could only smile bitterly, "Because I took the wrong medicine."

The night had not passed, Lu Xiaofeng's trouble had not passed either. When he returned to his room, he found that the Beef Soup was sitting on his bed, waiting for him!

"What wrong medicine did you take? Aphrodisiac?" She stared at Lu Xiaofeng, "Even if you took aphrodisiac, you should have come looking for me; why did you look for a man? Do you have some kind of sickness?"

Lu Xiaofeng could only smile wryly, "My sickness is not only one."

"What other sickness do you have?"

"Hunger!"

"This kind of sickness is not a problem." She already broke into laughter, "I happen to have the exact drug to cure this kind of sickness."

"Beef?"

"Beef-filled mantou [steamed bun], plus a large pot of ice-cold glutinous rice wine that was cooled in the seawater to send it down your tummy. What do you think?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, "I think there is no better medicine on earth than

that.”

Drinking too much, sleeping too little, Lu Xiaofeng woke up with bloated feeling in his belly, plus he had a splitting headache.

It was not even noon, the front lobby was empty. The newly swept hall looked like a newly-washed broken pot. Although the soot and ash remnant had already been washed clean, it looked even more shabby and ugly.

He thought of getting a pot of boiled water and brewed some tea. He had just had two mouthfuls when he saw Yue Yang and another man came out into the fresh, bright sun.

The two men were chatting, Yue Yang looked very happy, he seemed to be doing most of the talking.

The man who made him this happy was surprisingly the one who dealt with him the ‘Soul Fragrance Rooster Cry of the Fifth Watch’ the previous night; the one with a long and narrow horse-face. Lu Xiaofeng remembered him very clearly.

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbstruck. Who is the one with real sickness here? As a matter of fact, he had never seen anybody with more sickness than this young man.

Catching a glimpse of Lu Xiaofeng, Yue Yang’s countenance immediately fell. The two men whispered a few words. Yue Yang then unexpectedly came over and sat down opposite of him.

Lu Xiaofeng was a little flattered; he could not help asking, "That man is your friend?"

Of course, he was asking about that long-face, who, at this moment, was walking along the beach to the west; he was walking very fast, as if afraid Lu Xiaofeng might catch up with him.

"He is not my friend," Yue Yang replied.

Lu Xiaofeng exhaled; this young man, after all, was still able to distinguish good from bad, virtue from evil, he still knew who was his friend, and who was not.

"He is my big brother," Yue Yang continued.

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng felt foolish. He was about to ask further: I wonder what was this big brother doing last night? Yet Yue Yang was not interested in talking about this matter. He suddenly asked, "You also want to go out to sea?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded.

"You also want to ride on the Old Fox's ship?" Yue Yang asked.

Lu Xiaofeng nodded again. It was only then did he find out that this young man was also a passenger on that boat.

Yue Yang maintained a calm and collected expression, he said coldly, "It would be best for you to find another ship."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Yue Yang said, "Because I have paid five hundred taels to charter that ship."

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "I really wish I can change the ship, too bad I have also paid five hundred taels to charter the ship."

Yue Yang's countenance changed. Right this moment, the not-sober-yet, barely-wake-up Old Fox happened to appear. Immediately Yue Yang went over to ask the Old Fox: what the hell is going on?

In the Old Fox's mind, this matter was very simple. "That is a big ship, one extra person riding on it will not make it sink. Besides, both of you, gentlemen, are in a hurry to go to the sea."

Again, with his full-of-calluses hand, he whacked the young man's shoulder, "The more people we have on board, the more exciting will it be. Besides, being able to cross the ocean together is the cultivation of five-hundred year karma. If you want to change ship, I can refund your money to you, but at most I can only pay you back four hundred taels."

Yue Yang did not say a word; he turned around and left.

The Old Fox looked at Lu Xiaofeng with squinted eyes; he giggled and said, "What?"

Holding his head in his hands, Lu Xiaofeng replied with a sigh, "Nothing."

The Old Fox roared in laughter, "I think you must have drunk too much beef soup."

When lunch time arrived, Lu Xiaofeng forced himself to get something down his tummy. Unexpectedly Yue Yang came back for him. He put down a large bundle on the table and pushed it toward Lu Xiaofeng, "Here is five hundred taels, just consider I refund the money you used to hire the ship. You must find another ship."

He would rather pay Lu Xiaofeng five hundred taels than taking a hundred taels loss by accepting the four hundred taels from the Old Fox. Why is that?

Lu Xiaofeng did not understand, "So you are determined to take the Old Fox's ship? And you are determined not to let me go on board?"

Yue Yang's response was very blunt, "Yes."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because I don't like people who meddle in other people's business," Yue Yang replied.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at him. He stretched out his finger and pushed the

bundle on the table back to him.

Yue Yang's countenance changed, "You won't take it?"

Lu Xiaofeng's response was equally blunt, "Yes!"

"Why?" Yue Yang asked.

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled. He suddenly said, "Because that is a big ship, one extra person riding on it will not make it sink!"

Yue Yang stared at him. Suddenly his eyes revealed a strange expression, "You won't regret it?"

Lu Xiaofeng indifferently said, "In all my life I have never had any regret. Not even once."

In all he did, indeed he had never had any regret, but this time perhaps he would regret it. It's just that naturally it was a matter of the distant future.

From noon until that evening, the day dragged on ever so slowly, everything seemed to be very boring.

When one had too much drink one night, one would always feel especially bad the next day. The only exciting thing that happened was when the Old Fox suddenly announced, "The goods have been loaded, we will set sail early tomorrow."

Very early in the morning the next day, Lu Xiaofeng got up before dawn. Surprisingly, for the entire night the Beef Soup did not come to harass him; indeed it was quite beyond his expectation.

Although he did not sleep well that night, his head did not ache, instead, his spirit was trembling with excitement, his heart was filled with anticipation.

Such a wide and spectacular ocean, such a mysterious and enchanting ocean scenery, just waiting for him to discover and admire.

After so many dangerous, frightening, and complicated matters, at long last not only he was alive, he was able to break away from everything. And now he was about to go out to sea.

His destination, the island nation Fusang[1], what kind place it actually is? The people on the islands, are they the same as the people on the Central Earth? Is it true that they are the descendants of four hundreds virgin boys and girls brought from the Central Earth by the Court Scholar Xu Fu[2] who was sent by Qin Shi Huang [first emperor of unified China] to find the elixir of life?

They say that the girls in that place, not only they were beautiful and passionate, they were even more tender to men; when the husband was about to go out the door, the wife would always kneel at the door to send him off, when the husband returned home, the wife was already kneeling at the door, waiting to take his shoes off.

Thinking about it, Lu Xiaofeng was so excited that all worries and care

in his mind was tossed beyond the topmost clouds.

A whole new world was waiting for him to discover, a new life has just begun.

Although the sun had not brightened the day, by the time he pushed the door to go out, he saw Yue Yang was already standing at the beach, facing the sea in deep thought.

What was the concern loading this young man's mind? Why did he want to go to sea?

The first thread of sunlight broke through the cloud, the surface of the sea resplendent with golden ray; it was indeed a glorious sight.

He suddenly turned around and walked away slowly following the water line.

At first Lu Xiaofeng was thinking of catching up with him, but after another thought he changed his mind. They were going to ride on the same ship, crossing the ocean together anyway; there would be plenty of opportunity later on.

Amidst the morning breeze, he seemed to smell the aroma of beef soup. Lu Xiaofeng could not restrain smile from forming on the corner of his mouth. Before boarding the ship, it would be a really pleasant thing if he could drink a bowl of hot beef soup.

Yue Yang was still walking slowly along the beach. The waves crashed

onto the beach, the water wet his shoes, wet his trousers, yet he seemed to be oblivious of it all.

There was indeed something in his mind. He was much more excited than Lu Xiaofeng, he was much more nervous as well.

This time he went out to sea the changes in him would be great, just last night he nearly changed his mind, he wanted to give up, to leave in the middle of the night and go home, to be a filial son who was content with his lot in life, to enjoy the worldly glory, splendor, wealth and rank.

As long as he was being obedient, he would get whatever he wanted.

Too bad what he wanted was not a life of pleasure; rather, he wanted a full and independent life, a full and independent personality.

Thinking about his gentle and virtuous mother, who has suffered enough grievances in her life, when he woke up this morning, there were tears in his eyes.

But now, everything is too late.

He had made up his mind not to think about things that he was unable to change. Looking up, he saw Hu Sheng was waiting for him under a big rock ahead.

Under the light of the rising sun, Hu Sheng's long and narrow face looked bright.

Looking at this young man walking over, he had an unspeakable delight mixed with pride in his heart.

This was an outstanding young man; intelligent, strong, cool-headed, plus an almost-animal instinct, who was able to feel disaster in advance and smell where the danger is.

He knew that this young man would definitely become a flawless expert, who will be extremely valuable to him, as well as to his friends.

Young people nowadays increasingly prefer life's enjoyment; those who can be trained to be experts are not many anymore.

With praise in his eyes, he fixed his gaze on this young man as he stopped in front of him, "Did you sleep well last night?"

"Not good, I did not sleep well," Yue Yang replied.

He was telling the truth. In front of his big brother, he has always been telling the truth. Usually those who are truthful are the ones who can earn people's respect.

To this fact, obviously Hu Sheng was also very pleased, "Did that four eyebrows come to harass you?"

"He did not," Yue Yang replied.

Hu Sheng said, "Actually, you don't have to worry about him, he is simply a nobody."

"I know," Yue Yang replied.

In other people's eyes, Lu Xiaofeng has turned into a nobody; perhaps this was the first time this thing ever happened.

From his pocket Hu Sheng took out a sealed envelope and handed it over to Yue Yang, "This is the last directive for you before you board the ship. As soon as it is accomplished, you can get on the boat."

Yue Yang took it, opened the envelope, read it, and suddenly terror appeared on his handsome face, his hands also started to tremble.

"What is the directive telling you to do?" Hu Sheng asked.

Yue Yang did not reply. After a long time, gradually he restored his calm. Tearing down the envelope and the paper, piece by piece he put it into his mouth, which he chewed and slowly swallowed it down into his belly.

Hu Sheng's eyes showed approval. The directives are meant to be for one person only. Apart from this man and the recipient himself, no third person was to be allowed to know.

Yue Yang undoubtedly had accomplished that.

Hu Sheng asked again, "What are you supposed to do this time?"

Yue Yang looked straight at him. After another long while, he spoke word by word, "I must kill you."

Hu Sheng's face suddenly twitched, as if he had just been whipped, "You can be who you are today, who brought you to this day?"

"It's you!" Yue Yang replied.

"Yet you want to kill me!" Hu Sheng said.

Yue Yang's eyes were brimming with pain, yet his voice was still as calm as ever, "I don't want to kill you at all, but I simply cannot not kill you!"

"Nobody will find out anyway," Hu Sheng said, "Can't you just defy the order just once?"

"I can't," Yue Yang replied.

Hu Sheng looked at him; his gaze became as cold as blade. He slowly said, "In that case, you should not have told me."

"Why?" Yue Yang asked.

Hu Sheng coldly said, "If you seized the opportunity to strike surreptitiously, perhaps you still have a chance of success, but now that I

know, the one who die will be you.”

Yue Yang closed his mouth, his thin lips looked even more cruel; suddenly, like a leopard, he pounced.

He knew that the opponent was capable of even more vicious and cruel move, only by close hand-to-hand combat he would be able to subdue the opponent.

Obviously Hu Sheng did not expect this move. When martial art experts fought, they would not have used this kind of method.

By the time he was on guard, Yue Yang had already pounced on him. The two men immediately rolled around together, from the sharp and lofty rock rolled down into the sea, tearing and biting at each other like beasts.

Hu Sheng had begun to gasp for breath; he was a lot older than this young man, unavoidably his physical strength was somewhat worse, and apparently his movement was not as good as this young savage.

He wanted to clutch the opponent's neck, but Yue Yang's elbow suddenly struck the softest part of his flank, and then backhandedly he struck Hu Sheng's throat, followed by a roll of his body so that now he was riding on him. His fist was punching toward the bridge of Hu Sheng's nose.

Before this punch arrived, Hu Sheng suddenly cried out, “Wait, read the other directive I have first!”

Yue Yang hesitated only so slightly, the punch still continued. When Hu Sheng's face splattered with blood and he was powerless to fight him anymore, he groped Hu Sheng's pocket and took out another sealed envelope. Still riding on Hu Sheng's body he tore the envelope using only one hand and read.

His countenance changed again. Slowly he stood up; it was not clear from his expression whether he was grateful or sorrowful?

Hu Sheng also struggled to sit up; still gasping for breath he said, "This is just to test you, to see whether you can absolutely follow the orders."

His face was bloody, the bridge of his nose was broken, making his face appeared crooked and awful.

Yet he was laughing, "Now you have passed the test, and are fully qualified. Go aboard the ship."

Yue Yang immediately turned around and left in large strides.

When he turned around, there seemed to be glistening tears in his eyes, but he steeled himself to show restraint.

He made a vow never to shed tears again. Everything was of his own choosing, he must not complain, and he must not be sad either.

To him, 'feeling' has become a luxury. Not only a luxury, but it was

dangerous as well. Dangerous enough that it may be fatal to him!

He must stay alive. If someone must die, it can't possibly be him!

The departure time was changed, now it was scheduled to be afternoon, because the last batch of goods had not made its way to the ship yet.

Already the boatmen and sailors who were ready to set sail went back to gamble, drink wine, and took liberties with women; taking the last opportunity before going out to sea, to have as much merriment as possible, because after this, they would have to pass their days like monks or the ascetics, when waking up in the middle of the night with lust, they could only resolve the problem manually.

The beef soup in Lu Xiaofeng's stomach has been completely digested; while he was thinking of finding something fun to pass the time, he saw Yue Yang, whose clothes were smashed to pieces, whose face was covered all over with blood, was walking over from the beach.

How did he become like this? What did he do just now? Did he fight to the death with others? If so, with who? Could it be with that big brother with long face like a horse?

This time surprisingly Lu Xiaofeng was able to restrain himself and did not ask, he even did not show the least bit of astonishment, as if he did not see anything.

Yue Yang was looking for water to drink. No matter who, anybody who

had just swallowed two pieces of paper would want to drink some water.

Fortunately there was a pot of water on the counter. Originally, that place was where the teacups and kettle were arranged, it's just that so few people were actually using it; people in this place preferred to drink wine.

This pot of water had just been brought out by a one-eyed old fisherman, all along nobody else has touched it.

Right now Yue Yang was in dire need of this kind of a pot full of water, so much so that he did not care to find a tea cup, he wanted to drink the water straight from the spout.

When one had just been through a life and death fight, his spirit, as well as his physical strength, were in exhausted state, inevitably his vigilance was a bit relaxed. Much less he felt that he was absolutely safe.

Lu Xiaofeng, however, suddenly remembered something.

In the last two days, that one-eyed old fisherman did not even drink a drop of water, why did he bring the pot out?

This thought also made Lu Xiaofeng noted something else: in the Fox Den, only this young man drank water. His drinking was not worth watching, yet all along the one-eyed old fisherman has been secretly watching him. The expression on his face seemed like he was itching to have Yue Yang drink the entire pot of water at once.

Yue Yang's mouth had already been in contact with the spout of the pot. Lu Xiaofeng's arm suddenly reached into his pocket, his two fingers flicked, a silver ingot shot out, 'Ding!' it struck the water pot.

The spout was struck askew, and was flattened.

Yue Yang only felt a jolt on his hand, the pot fell to the floor, water splashed out, several beads of water splashed onto his hand. He brought his hand to his nose to smell, his countenance immediately changed.

Lu Xiaofeng did not need to ask, he knew the water must be poisoned.

The one-eyed old fisherman turned around, he wanted to slip out quietly. Lu Xiaofeng already swept past. The old fisherman sent out a punch to strike back, his movement was very fast, the power behind the strike was also very strong, too bad his opponent this time was Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng was even faster, with one stretch of his hand he already twisted the old fisherman's arm, and with the other hand he caught his entire body and pushed it in front of Yue Yang. "This man is yours!"

Yue Yang looked at him, seemingly oblivious of what Lu Xiaofeng was talking about. He said coldly, "Why do I want this man?"

"Don't you want to know who wanted to harm you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I don't need to ask, I know who wanted to harm me!" Yue Yang replied.

"Who?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"You!" Yue Yang replied.

Lu Xiaofeng felt foolish.

Yue Yang coldly said, "I wanted to drink, but you knocked down my water pot. If it wasn't you who wanted to harm me, who else?"

The old fisherman slowly stood up; he said, "Not only you harmed him, you also harmed me. You twisted my upper arm that it almost broke. I want you to pay me."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly laughed. "I'll pay, I'll pay. Just consider I give this silver ingot to you to pay for your drink!"

Unexpectedly the old fisherman was not polite at all, he picked up the silver from the floor and left; he did not even cast a single glance toward Yue Yang.

Unexpectedly Yue Yang did not look at him either; he stared hard at Lu Xiaofeng. Suddenly he asked, "Can I ask you a favor?"

"Speak!" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Yue Yang said, "Leave me alone. The father the better."

Yue Yang sat down. Right now Lu Xiaofeng had left him very far away. In fact, Yue Yang did not even see Lu Xiaofeng's shadow. This man, who by nature loved to meddle in other people's business, whose business he was meddling this time?

The one-eyed old fisherman had also vanished without any trace.

Yue Yang suddenly sprang up and rushed out.

He must stop Lu Xiaofeng, he must block Lu Xiaofeng from questioning the old fisherman.

His guess was not incorrect, Lu Xiaofeng was indeed looking for that old fisherman. They found him almost at the exact same time.

Because they heard a scream from the beach over there. By the time they got there, the old fisherman, who spent most of his life on the sea, had been drowned alive.

If even good swimmers can drown in water, then anybody can drown.

However, he was going to drink wine, how come for no rhyme or reason, fully dressed, neat and tidy, suddenly jumped into the sea?

Lu Xiaofeng looked at Yue Yang. Yue Yang looked at Lu Xiaofeng. Suddenly they heard someone shouting in the distance, "Set sail, set sail!"

[1] Fusang, mythical island of ancient literature, often interpreted as Japan.

[2] Xu Fu, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xu_Fu

Chapter 3 – Panic at Sea

"Weigh anchor!"

"Sail away!"

"Bon voyage!"

Loud shouts rose and fell in succession. Finally the Old Fox's ship left the beach by sunset.

The hull was deep in the water, apparently the ship was loaded full of cargo. The foxes' only weakness is greed, hence it was easy for the hunters to catch them.

It seemed that the Old Fox was just the same.

Lu Xiaofeng wanted to catch this Old Fox very much, he wanted to ask: what kind of cargo was this ship carrying? If the load was too heavy, wouldn't it be dangerous? Before he could catch the Old Fox, he nearly knocked over the Beef Soup.

The main cabin door was ajar, while he was walking in from the outside, Beef Soup happened to walk out from the inside.

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked to see her, "Why are you on board?"

Beef Soup winked, "Because all of you are on board?"

"So because we went on board, you also wanted to come on board?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Beef Soup said, "Let me ask you: when you are on board, do you still want to eat?"

Naturally they did. As long as one is alive, no matter where they are, they still need to eat. If they still need to eat, then someone has to cook for them.

Beef Soup pointed to her own nose, "When I cook, not only I can cook other dishes, I can cook beef too."

Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Since when did you change your profession?"

Beef Soup laugh. Her laughter sounded very sweet. "Actually, my original profession is a chef, only occasionally I change profession to do other things; that's all!"

There were a total of eight cabins on the main deck; each cabin door was decorated with carved pattern and a bronze knob, it looked luxurious and elegant.

Beef Soup said, "I heard that the people on board this ship are all men of great status."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. With a bitter laugh he said, "I should have thought of that; otherwise, how could they afford to pay the Old Fox's ship fare."

Beef Soup cast him a glance with the corner of her eye, "So do you have any status?" she asked.

"I don't!" Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"You only have money?" Beef Soup asked.

"I don't have that either," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "After paying the ship fare, I am almost completely broke."

He was telling the truth.

Beef Soup laughed, "It doesn't matter if you don't have money, if occasionally you take the wrong medicine, I can still occasionally change profession."

Lu Xiaofeng only sighed; in all honesty he could not figure out how this kind of girl would be able to cook some meals.

Beef Soup pointed to the third cabin on the left, "That cabin is yours," she said, "That b@stard who only eat boiled egg is in the first cabin on the right."

"Can I change cabin?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Nope!" Beef Soup replied.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Beef Soup said, "Because other cabins are all occupied."

Lu Xiaofeng exclaimed, "That Old Fox advised me to charter the ship, but now each room is occupied?"

Beef Soup said drily, "Not only the eight cabins here are all occupied, all the sixteen cabins on the deck below are also occupied. The Old Fox always loves excitement, the more people he has, the happier he is."

She laughed. And then she said, "But those who occupied the upper cabins are all distinguished guests. The Old Fox especially ordered me to cook several good dishes for you. What do you want to eat tonight?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I want to eat roast fox, an old fox with crisp roasted bones."

Although there was no roast fox at dinnertime, the dishes were sumptuous; surprisingly, Beef Soup indeed knew how to cook good dishes.

"Because my (maternal) grandmother often said, to win a man's heart, the fastest route is through his stomach. Only women who can cook good food can marry good husband."

When she said that, all the distinguished guests broke into laughter, only Lu Xiaofeng was unable to laugh.

He was unable to figure out where the Old Fox found these distinguished guests; one was more annoying than the next. All along Yue Yang did not appear at all, as soon as he entered his cabin, he never came out again.

After dinner, which felt like it would go on forever, finally the night was deep the people quiet. Lu Xiaofeng stood alone by the ship's railing, looking at the vast ocean and glittering starlight. It felt as if between the heaven and the earth, he was the only man remained; only then did he finally feel somewhat free.

'Loneliness', sometimes it was something to enjoy, yet it was also the time when people remembered things that they were not supposed to remember.

Too many sad memories, not only will make people age faster, oftentimes it will also change people.

Fortunately, Lu Xiaofeng has not changed too much. Lu Xiaofeng was still passionate, impulsive, sometimes annoyingly foolish, yet sometimes extremely intelligent. He is the Lu Xiaofeng who did not care about anything, yet clearly loved to meddle into other people's business.

What kind of person was Yue Yang? The clothes he wore, not only the material was top quality, the cut was also very exquisite. He did not care about money, and he could afford to give five hundred taels casually to other people. Although his pair of arms was long and powerful, he did

not look like people who were used to menial labor. His every movement carried an imposing manner, as if everybody else in the world should jump at his command.

From these several points, it appeared that he came from a rich and powerful family. But obviously he was too smart, too callous; usually sons of rich and powerful families were not like that.

Repeatedly he fell under other people's harming plots, each one nearly took his life; yet not only he did not care, he did not want to know either.

That one-eyed old fisherman obviously wanted to poison him to death, and he obviously knew about it, yet he feigned ignorance. Was it because he was on the run, and he already knew who he was dealing with?

But clearly he was not trying to hide; he did not act like he was trying to cover his track or run away from someone. Instead, he acted like he was running away from Lu Xiaofeng, he did not want to be on the same ship with Lu Xiaofeng, while Lu Xiaofeng did not have the slightest intention of harming him; on the contrary, Lu Xiaofeng just wanted to make friends with him.

These questions, Lu Xiaofeng did not know the answer.

He was thinking about these things when suddenly, 'Crack!' a plank of wood pressed down on him, followed by a strong gust of wind, an oar swept across toward his waist.

He was standing by the ship's railing, the only way out was to escape

downward. But down there was the ocean. By the time he heard a 'Splosh!' he was already landed into the ocean.

The ice-cold seawater, the salty seawater.

He moved his legs underwater; his first thought was he wanted to kick on the water to try to pull himself up the hull. But above him the oar struck down on his head again.

The body of the ship was high above his head, he could not see the person above. The sea reflected the starlight, so the person above could see him.

The only thing he could do was to step back; but the ship was moving forward, the distance between him and the ship was growing farther and farther away. Even if he had water skill like 'flying over the water', there was no way he would be able to catch up. Even if for the time being he would not drown, but how long would he last? When the sun rose in the morning, he would be drowning for sure.

Always resourceful, no matter what difficulty he faced, Lu Xiaofeng was always able to resolve it; how could he drown to death without any rhyme or reason just like that?

Definitely he would not drown that easy. But when someone falls into the sea, not drowning is not an option.

In that split second, he had already come up with several different ways to get out of this crisis.

One, to relax his whole body as much as possible, to let himself float on the water. As long as he could make it through the night, in the morning, there was great possibility that another ship would pass by. This place was not too far from the harbor, plus it was a busy maritime route.

Two, try to catch fish, use the raw fish meat to replenish his physical strength, and use the puffed fish to increase buoyancy.

Although these ideas might not necessarily work, but he was at least going to try, as long as there is a glimmer of hope, he would never want to miss it.

He believed that his own tolerance for pain and his power in meeting a contingency was better than average people.

The most important thing was that he had an unyielding will to live. Perhaps it was exactly due to this kind of staunch determination that he was able to get through countless crises, and was able to stay alive until now. He simply had to keep on living.

Who would have thought that he had not even executed any of these ideas when there was a 'Splash!' on the surface of the sea? Something was thrown from the ship to him. Unexpectedly it was a life boat.

The person who struck him into the water did not want him to die in the sea at all, he just wanted to force him out of the ship.

Other than Yue Yang, who could have done such thing?

The small skiff fell quite some distance down, yet it did not capsize at all. The person who threw it must have used his power in such an ingenious way.

From the water Lu Xiaofeng pulled himself up and rolled over into the skiff, he was even more convinced that the person must be Yue Yang.

There were a pot of water and ten hard-boiled eggs in the skiff, and there was also a very heavy bundle. It was the bundle that Yue Yang pushed to him on the table the other day, which, of course, contained the five hundred taels to compensate his ship fare.

This young man was definitely a straightforward man, not only he did not try to conceal anything, he also seemed to specifically tell Lu Xiaofeng, "I simply don't want you to get on this ship; what are you going to do about it?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, but also could not help laughing.

He liked this young man, he liked the way he worked. But now it looked as if he would never see this young man anymore.

Vast and obscure ocean, looking at four direction, he did not see any boundary. Should he try to chase the Old Fox's ship with all his might, or should he return to the direction they were coming from?

Naturally he would try to catch up with everything he had.

It was only six or eight hours[1] ago that their ship went out to sea; if he was willing to row with all his might, plus a little bit of luck, come daybreak, he might be able to sit in the Fox Den, drinking wine.

Too bad he forgot two things: One, when the ship left the port, they had tail wind, the power of two oars can't possibly compete with the wind on the sail. Two, lately his luck has not been so good.

Before the sun was up, his arms were already stiff and numb from hard rowing. Unexpectedly, doing this kind of easy and monotonous motion entailed more strenuous effort than anything else.

He ate several eggs and drank some water, but his mouth felt bitter. He just wanted to lie down to rest for a little bit, but as soon as he lay down, he fell asleep. By the time he woke up, his eyes were blinded by the glaring sun, which, by this time was already high in the sky. In his sleep, unexpectedly he knocked over the pot of water, which was more valuable than gold juice; the water splashed and had already been dried by the sun.

His lips were chapped by the sun. Everywhere he looked, the sky and the sea were connected to each other, there was not even a shadow of land.

But he did see a tiny shadow of a sail, and the sail was moving in his direction.

He almost could not stop himself from making eighty-seven somersaults on the little skiff to express his delight. Even a beggar who just saw a big piece of yuanbao[2] falling down from the sky would not

be as happy as he was right now.

The ship was coming fast. Suddenly he had a feeling of déjà vu, since he knew the ship. The one standing on the bow looked even more familiar, because it was none other than the Old Fox.

The Old Fox also had a pair of sharp eyes, he had already waved his arms and shouted from a distant. When the ship was getting closer to the small skiff, Lu Xiaofeng was even able to see all the wrinkles on his face.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly realized that the Old Fox's weather-beaten face was actually more adorable than a young girl.

He almost could not help but jumping up and down and yelling at the top of his lungs, but he steeled himself to stay calm and deliberately lay down on the small skiff, putting up a very relaxed manner.

The Old Fox shouted, "We looked for you everywhere, what are you doing in here all alone?"

Lu Xiaofeng unhurriedly said, "I can't stand those dishes that the Beef Soup made, so I wanted to catch some fish to accompany my wine."

The Old Fox was stumped. "Did you catch any?" he asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Fish, I did not catch any, but I managed to catch an old fox."

He could not bear not to ask, "You have obviously been far away at sea, why did you go back?"

The Old Fox laughed, and then putting up an official face of an old fox he said, "I am coming back to catch some fish."

"So there's no fish over there?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Old Fox laughed and said, "There are some over there, it's just that none is willing to pay me five hundred taels for the ship fare."

Lu Xiaofeng immediately said, "The fish in here is not willing to pay either, last time I have already paid."

"Last time was last time, this time is this time," the Old Fox said, "Last time you wanted to board the ship on your own, I did not force you to get out either; therefore, if you want to board the ship this time, you must pay me another five hundred taels!"

Lu Xiaofeng could not bear not to cry out, "Exactly how black is your heart?"

The Old Fox laughed again and unhurriedly said, "Just a little bit darker than the old fox you caught from the sea."

Naturally he did not come back to catch some fish.

The cargo loaded onto the ship was too much that they forgot to load

fresh water. On the ocean, even an old fox was helpless to find a drop of drinkable fresh water.

They only came back to fetch water.

Perhaps this is fate, Lu Xiaofeng seemed to be decreed by fate to ride on this ship. Is this good luck? Or bad luck?

Who knows?

The ship reached the shore. Lu Xiaofeng and the Old Fox stood on the bow. No matter what, to be able to see land again was always a good feeling.

Next to a rock in the distance, a man was looking this direction. His long and narrow horse-face showed a kind of surprised expression.

Lu Xiaofeng pretended not to see him, he quietly went to other side and got off the ship. The man by the rock was watching the ship's activity with rapt attention, but he did not notice Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng went around in circle and quietly crept toward him. Suddenly he appeared in front of the man and loudly said, "How are you?"

He thought this man must be greatly surprised; who would have thought that the man simply blinked, his gaze still carried the same cool and callous look as he looked back at Lu Xiaofeng and said, "How are you?"

This man, every single nerve on his body seemed to be made of iron wire.

Lu Xiaofeng felt a bit uncomfortable instead; with a forced laugh he said, "Aren't you surprised that we came back?"

Hu Sheng did not deny at all.

"We came back for you," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Why for me?" Hu Sheng asked.

"Because the cargo you sent is too heavy," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "We are afraid the ship might capsize, so we came back to return it to you!"

He was putting up a proverbial spear to elicit the man's reaction to find out his actual intention.

Who would have thought that this time Hu Sheng did not even blink? He coldly said, "The goods is not mine, the ship is not yours. This matter has nothing to do with either me or you. Why are you looking for me?"

Apparently Lu Xiaofeng's proverbial spear had bumped against a stone wall, but he was unwilling to give up. "If it is not yours," he asked again, "What are you doing standing in here? Is it to use the 'Soul Fragrance Rooster Cry of the Fifth Watch [see Chapter 2]' to deal with your brother?"

Hu Sheng's cold and as sharp-as-blade gaze was fixed on Lu Xiaofeng's face, but his body suddenly leaped up like a scallion being pulled up from dry ground, like a sparrow hawk flipping in the air, like an osprey diving into the water. In a blink of an eye he displayed three different qinggong [lightness skill] techniques, 'splash!' and disappeared into the water. Unexpectedly his qinggong was not inferior to the Lone Thief Sikong Zhaixing.

No matter who, anybody who possessed this kind of qinggong must be a person of great background.

Lx looked at the waves, rolling up and crashing down on the beach, there were hundreds of questions in his heart. When he turned around, he saw Yue Yang's cold and as sharp-as-blade gaze was fixed on him.

He simply walked over and said with a smile, "Surprised? Unexpectedly we meet again."

Yue Yang coldly said, "I am surprised that you can't even finish ten hard-boiled eggs."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "So, next time you are thinking of striking me into the water, it would be best if you remember one thing."

"What thing?" Yue Yang asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I don't like plain hard-boiled eggs, I like yellow wine and beef."

Yue Yang said, "Next time you fall into the water, I am afraid you'll have only one thing to eat."

"What thing?" lx asked.

"Your own flesh," Yue Yang replied.

Lu Xiaofeng roared in laughter. But people on the beach were crying out in alarm, a body was washed away to the beach by the waves; to their shock, it was a dead body.

They rushed over, and immediately discovered that this dead body belonged to the friend who had just jumped into the water. His qinggong was so high, yet his water skill was this bad? How could he drown as soon as he jumped into the water?

"This man is not drowned," the fisherman who found his body said with confidence, "Because there is no water in his stomach."

Yet not even a scratch of blood was found on his body.

"How did he die?"

Lu Xiaofeng turned his head toward Yue Yang, "He seemed to die just like that one-eyed old man."

But Yue Yang simply turned around and walked away, while hanging his head down; he seemed to be unspeakably tired and sad.

To kill Hu Sheng was not easy at all.

Naturally the murderer was not Yue Yang.

There must be some terrifying killer in the area, using the same terrifying technique to kill Hu Sheng and the old fisherman.

There was only one similarity between these two men: both of them at one time tried to kill Yue Yang.

Could it be that this was the reason of their death?

In that case, what relationship did the killer have with Yue Yang?

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. He refused to give this matter another thought. Right now he just want to take a bath immediately.

Anybody who has been soaked in salt water for a while will definitely want to take a bath.

It does not matter whether he had just killed somebody or not.

The bath area was very simple and crude, it was nothing more than a few broken down boards put together to form a row of three stalls. If one had the thought of peeping someone taking a bath, one would easily find quite a few good holes on any board.

Other than these big holes and small holes, there was nothing inside. Those who wanted to take a bath must carry their own water in.

Lu Xiaofeng carried a bucket of water into one of the stall, to his surprise, someone was taking a bath in the next stall, while humming a tune in low voice. Unexpectedly it was a woman's voice.

Usually not many people came here to bathe, the number of women who had the courage to take a bath was even smaller, knowing that when they were bathing, there was a good chance someone would peep at any time. Obviously this kind of feeling would not be pleasant.

Fortunately, Lu Xiaofeng did not have such habit, so that he also did not expect that from a small hole on the board a pair of eyes was peeping at him.

Immediately he turned his back. The person that was peeping at him squealed in laughter. Unexpectedly her laughter was very sweet.

"Beef soup!" Lu Xiaofeng called out. Naturally he was familiar with Beef Soup's voice.

Still giggling, Beef Soup said, "I did not expect you like cleanliness, surprisingly you even came alone to bathe."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "If I don't come alone to bathe, could it be that I must look for someone else to bathe me?"

Beef Soup said, "Isn't it because you wanted to peep on me bathing that you came here to bathe?"

Lu Xiaofeng replied, "The one who loves to peep on someone else bathing, I don't think that's me."

Beef Soup said, "I can peep on you, but you must not peep on me ..."

She has not even finished her sentence when the boards suddenly collapsed. Beef Soup was originally leaning on the board, this time the person and the board fell down together on Lu Xiaofeng. The amount of material covering those two bodies right now, added together still not even enough to make a baby's diaper.

So now they did not need to argue who was peeping on whom.

A long time passed before Beef Soup finally sighed gently and said, "You really are not a good thing."

"How about you?"

"I think neither am I!"

Two people who were not good thing, crowded together in a small room that could collapse at any time, the situation was indeed not good.

Worse yet, right this moment they heard someone shouting in the distance, "Set sail, set sail!"

The ship has been sailing for three days. These three days were, surprisingly, very calm. There was moderate wind, beautiful sun on the sea. Other than those boring dinner time with the 'distinguished guests', Lu Xiaofeng almost have nothing else to worry about.

All his troubles seemed to be blown away by the sea breeze, the reeking of blood was also blown dry by the wind.

Even Yue Yang did not seem to have any intention to knock him down into the sea anymore; but he would not give Yue Yang another chance either.

The cargo on board was just some wooden image of Buddha, plus some wooden fish to be used while chanting Buddhist scripture. He had asked the Old Fox, and had personally seen the cargo.

"Fusang Island people have recently put their faith in Buddha, therefore, Buddha statues and wooden fish are best-seller," the Old Fox explained, "Although they have people who can carve images of Buddha over there, but the craftsmanship is not as good."

The carving of these Buddha statues was indeed very fine. Carving was actually a kind of ancient art. Naturally it was not something that those prejudiced, narrow-minded dwarves[3] were able to comprehend.

They loved these fine arts, perhaps it was only because of deep-rooted ethnic inferiority complex, they would feel it was an honor and glory, as well as a delight, if they could obtain a bit of thing from the hands of the descendants of the Fiery Emperor and Yellow Emperor (i.e. Han Chinese

people), be it by buying, stealing, or robbing.

This kind of matter, Lu Xiaofeng did not quite understand, but he did not really want to know either, because at that time there was no one consider those 'shrinking shoulder, short legged, pretentious' nouveau riche as important.

The owners of this cargo of Buddha statues and wooden fish were exactly those 'vulgar, unbearable' distinguished guests, who wished to come into contact with the newly rich people, who were obviously not very likeable themselves.

Fortunately Lu Xiaofeng could simply ignore them; if he wanted to chat, he would rather go to the Old Fox and the Beef Soup. When he did not want to chat, he would lie down in his cabin alone, enjoying the tranquility that he rarely had the pleasure to enjoy.

It was when he was enjoying the most tranquil time like this when the ship suddenly became very un-tranquil.

He was originally lying down peacefully in his bed, but all of a sudden he was thrown up and almost crash against the board wall.

The ship suddenly became like a sieve, the people on board became like the rice in the sieve.

With a lot of difficulty Lu Xiaofeng finally was able to stand, but soon he was thrown against the other wall. He had to grab the handle first, and then slowly opened the door. Immediately he heard the noise of people

running around and crying out in alarm.

The calm glassy sea suddenly became a stormy sea. It would be very difficult for people who have never personally experienced it to imagine such a dreadful storm.

The water rolled up like mountain peaks and came crashing down, with mournful shriek it struck the hull of the ship like a giant iron hammer beating the drum. As soon as the water found a crevice, it would immediately flowed in. The people were like the soup boiling on a huge stove.

The large sturdy ship, in this kind of storm had become like a children's toy!

No matter what kind of man, no matter how much accomplishment he achieved, in this kind of gale would become humble and fragile, a man who had completely lost his mind and his confidence in himself.

Lu Xiaofeng tried to grab on anything he could grab. Finally he reached the Old Fox.

"Will this ship survive?"

The Old Fox did not answer. It was definitely the first time that he did not have any answer to someone else's question.

But lx already knew the answer. The despair in the Old Fox's eyes already said it all.

"You'd better try to hold on a piece of board," that was the last thing he heard the Old Fox said.

Another burst of waves billowed in, the Old Fox was unexpectedly thrown out the ship like a bullet, in a blink of an eye even his shadow could not be seen anymore.

Too bad Lu Xiaofeng did not remember what he said either.

Right now Lu Xiaofeng was not grabbing a plank of wood. Rather, he grabbed someone's hand, because he suddenly saw Yue Yang.

Yue Yang also looked at him coldly, with a hard-to-understand feeling on his eyes. Suddenly he said something very strange, "You should now by now, why I insisted on not letting you ride on this ship?"

"Are you saying that you already knew this ship is going to sink?"

Yue Yang did not answer, because right this moment the ship's main mast was coming down, a layer of gigantic mountain peak like of waves came crashing down, the ship was smashed just like a toy.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly could not see anything, and then he discovered that he was sinking into the sea.

A pitch-black sea.

[1] Orig. 3 or 4 sichen; a sichen is one of the twelve 2-hour periods of

the day.

[2] Yuanbao – silver or gold ingot, shaped like a boat.

[3] Dwarf, dictionary says 'old derogatory term for Japanese'.

Chapter 4 – After the calamity, renewed life

The storm finally passed, the sea was once again tranquil, like nothing ever happened, but no one knows how many innocent lives had been swallowed by it.

Pieces of the broken ship floated on the surface of the sea, along with many other unimaginable things, like the ship was spitting out the bones after it ate the contents. It looked unspeakably tragic and a total despair.

After a long time, a man slowly floated up. Lu Xiaofeng. He was still alive.

It was not because his luck was especially good, but because he has been through 'thousands hammer, hundreds refining (by fire)' early on. His ability to endure the pain and to strike back, others simply could not imagine.

A sparkling object floated in front of his eyes. He reached out to grab it. Unexpectedly it was a bronze chamber pot.

He laughed. In this kind of situation he was still able to laugh. This is also something that others simply could not imagine.

But if he did not laugh, what else can he do? If he cried, what good would it bring? If he could bring back to life those who have been through trials and tribulations with him, then he would cry from now until the end of the days.

Now, not a single person was in sight, not even a dead person. Even if everyone had died in the disaster, their remains should still float in the vicinity.

"Perhaps they have not floated up yet!"

Lu Xiaofeng also hoped that he could find a few surviving people, he wished to find the Old Fox, Beef Soup, Yue Yang ...

But he could not find anybody. It was like all the people on the ship had been completely swallowed by the sea; even their bones were swallowed.

Just now he happened to bump into wood plank, a remnant of the hull, just before he lost his consciousness. Could it be that in that short period of time everybody else had been rescued?

He wished that it were so. He would rather he was the only one dying. Too bad he also realized that it was impossible.

No one could have expected the storm approaching, no one could have expected the ship to perish.

In a storm like that, no one could have stayed on the sea nearby, waiting to rescue them.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly remembered Yue Yang, he remembered the strange expression in his eyes, "You should now by now, why I insisted on not letting you ride on this ship?"

Could it be that he really knew beforehand that this ship was going to capsize? And so he wanted to save Lu Xiaofeng, because Lu Xiaofeng had also saved him. But why did he insist on getting on board this ship? Could it be that he wished to court death? If he really wanted to die, he had already been dead; at least he would have been dead eight times.

Perhaps no one would ever be able to answer these questions. Lu Xiaofeng could only explain to himself, "That kid must have said those things to piss me off; he is not a deity, how would he know that in three days the ship would capsize?"

Right now Lu Xiaofeng was able to think clearly, because he was sitting on something that was completely reliable. He sat on a wooden statue of Buddha.

A zhang high [approx. 3m/10ft] Buddha statue, coincidentally the biggest Maitreya Buddha, lying on the sea just like a boat.

Unfortunately, not only this boat did not have yellow wine and beef, it did not even have any plain hard-boiled eggs.

"Next time you fall into the water, I am afraid you'll have only one thing to eat: Your own flesh."

Lu Xiaofeng really wanted to cut a piece of his own flesh to have a taste; he suddenly found he was hungry as hell.

Looking to the distance where the sky and the sea merged, he saw vast

haziness. It was a very beautiful day. Too bad that no matter how beautiful, it was not enough to fill his belly.

After the storm, there was not a single fish in the vicinity. The only fish he could see was the wooden fish, big and small, all kinds of wooden fish, everything floated forward brought by the current.

It's a pity that he did not have any desire to chant the scripture.

If the monks saw these wooden fish, what would they feel? He wondered. Would they wish, just like he did right now, that these fish were real fish with flesh and blood?

There seemed to be an undercurrent in the sea, carrying these wooden fish and the Buddha statues floating forward.

What kind of place was in front?

In front of him was still the sea, an endless and relentless ocean. Even if the sea stayed tranquil without any wave like this, even if this smiling Buddha Maitreya could cross to the other side, Lu Xiaofeng could not make it, for sure.

He was not carved from wood, he wanted to eat; if he did not, he would die of starvation. If he did not die of starvation, he would die of thirst.

Surrounded by water, a man could die of thirst, wouldn't it be some kind of a ridiculous irony?

Yet Lu Xiaofeng could not even laugh. His lips were completely dry, he almost succumbed to the temptation of drinking sea water.

The dusk came and went, the night fell, finally the long night also passed, the sun rose again. No one knew how long, he was almost completely delirious. He could not help drinking seawater, only to vomit it again. No one knew how long he has been vomiting, it seemed like even his intestines had been completely spitted out.

In this kind of half awake, half asleep condition, he felt as if he had fallen into a large net, a very, very large net, which was slowly tightening around him, hoisted him up that he felt that he was hanging in the air, and then he really fainted.

It was indeed beyond his imagination that he would wake up again after losing his consciousness; he could not imagine even more where he would be when he woke up.

When Lu Xiaofeng woke up, he was in a fairyland.

The sun was shining brightly, the sand on the beach was white, soft and very fine, the bluish green seawater looked like jade, the place where the gentle waves lapped the beach was foamy white. Clear and boundless sky with no clouds in sight, the land filled his eyes with emerald green.

If this was not fairyland, then what kind of place was it? How could living person reach this fairyland?

Lu Xiaofeng was still alive, there was indeed a fairyland among the world of the living. But he was having a hard time believing that it was real. From the moment he was thrown out of his bed to what has just happened right now, everything felt like it was a nightmare.

The smiling Buddha Maitreya was also lying on the beach. After going through so many disasters, its arms were still hugging its own round belly, its mouth was still wide open in laughter.

Lu Xiaofeng stared at the statue hatefully, "The people who rode the same boat as you all have died completely, yet you lie down in here smiling widely, what kind of Bodhisattva are you?"

Although that Bodhisattva was a Bodhisattva, it was carved out of wood, whether other people live or die, it was unable to do anything about it; other people cursed it, it could not hear.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, "Although you have shown injustice toward others, but you have saved my life, I should have not cursed you."

The disaster was over, he alone was the only survivor; should he be grateful, or should he be sad? Since others did not know, while he did not have any way of telling them, it seemed that this wooden puppet was the only friend with whom he went through trials and tribulations together.

If you have ever experienced these things, you would change just like him too.

Right now he was still alive, but whether he would be able to continue

living, he himself was not too sure.

The world is boundless, alone he arrived at this completely foreign land, even if this place was a fairyland, he was unable to bear it.

He struggled up. Surprisingly he was still able to stand. The first thing that came into his mind was water. If there were no water, the fairyland would turn into hell.

Patting the Buddha Maitreya's belly, he said, "You must be thirsty too, I'll go find water for everybody."

It looked like this place was an island. Among the trees, flowers and plants on the island, a lot of them he had never seen before. The Japanese banana [musa basjoo] tree was full of banana. Each one looked like a large mantou [steamed bun].

After eating several bananas, the thirst was even more unbearable. He snapped a branch and used it as a stick as he walked passed the banana tree. Unexpectedly he found a pond of clear spring.

He did not know until now, that water actually tastes so sweet, far surpassed the best green-bamboo-leaf wine.

It was only after he finished eating and drinking that he remembered a terrible matter.

"If there is no ship pass by, do I have to spend the rest of my life on this deserted island?"

No ship passed by.

He chose the largest rock on the shore and sat on top of it to watch the sea for a few days. Not even a single ship's shadow was to be seen.

This deserted island was definitely not on the ship route. He could only looked at the Buddha Maitreya with a bitter laugh, "It looks like we'll have to stay in this place for a while. We can't keep on living like a wild dog like this, we should at least try to look decent."

He had never carried saber, sword, or any sharp weapon. Luckily that copper chamber pot also followed him, floating onto the island. Cutting the chamber pot open, using a stone he flattened it and clamped it between two pieces of wood to make the handle, and then he ground it by the spring water for one or two sichen. Actually it became a knife that he could use.

He did not want to use this knife to kill at all.

Now he knew that other than to kill people, a knife actually has so many other uses.

Cutting branches as the frame, and using the leaves from palm tree and banana tree as the roof, he built a thatched house, which cannot be considered too ugly, by the spring. And then he gathered some soft grass and leaves and spread it on the ground. He let his only friend, the Buddha Maitreya, to lie down first. And then he lay down next to it. Looking at the moonlight leaking down through the banana leaves, and listening to the distant sound of waves lapping on the shore, he suddenly

felt his eyes were moist, a drop of tear flowed down his cheek.

In the past two years, this was the first time he shed some tears.

No matter what kind of disaster or suffering, he had never been afraid. But he suddenly realized that the most frightening thing in the world is loneliness.

He determined not to let himself thinking toward that direction again, he still had a lot of things to do.

The next day at dawn he walked along the beach looking for everything that he could bring back. There were Buddha statues, wooden fish, and all kinds of shells.

In the afternoon, his luck was better, during the low tide, he found a camphor wood chest.

Very carefully he carried it over his shoulder. He ate some banana first and drank some water before conducting the opening ceremony.

When the box is opened, he felt his heart was like a little deer, jumping around in his breast; he had never been as nervous and as excited as right now.

Inside the chest, there was a small jewelry box, filled to the brim with pearls and jewels; too bad it was completely useless right now. The most useful item was a comb, and some golden hairpins, and then there were two books of popular fiction that were produced by carving stone

printing by a local bookshop, one was 'Jade Pear Romance', the other was 'Chronicle or Chivalrous Tales'.

Naturally the chest was also full of clothes, but all were brightly colored women's clothes.

Ordinarily, Lu Xiaofeng would not even cast a glance toward these things, but now he was as excited as a little child who had just received the most beloved toy. He was so excited that he could not sleep that night.

The wooden fish could be cut open as bowl, so that he did not need to use his hand to hold water. The gold hairpins could be used as needles, with some hemp that he rolled between his hands, he could make some thread, and then he could convert these clothes into window and door curtains. He could now comb his unkempt hair that looked like rice straw. And then those two books, if he read them slowly, it would help him pass a lot of empty, lonely days.

Lying on the bed made of grass, he tossed and turned all night, thinking about these things. Suddenly he sprang up and gave himself two hard slaps on the face.

If the ever-smiling Maitreya knew, it must have thought that this man had been taking a wrong medicine again.

Giving himself two hard slaps on the face was not enough, 'slap, slap, slap, slap', he slapped himself everywhere, while pointing toward his own nose and cursed, "Lu Xiaofeng, oh Lu Xiaofeng, since when did you turn into such a worthless kid, thinking and planning all these mundane

things like a woman? Are you really going to spend the rest of your life like this?"

The day has not been brightened, he already selected the biggest wooden fish, knocked a hole on top, and fill it up with water. Using a strip of colorful silk gown he wrapped a couple of banana, and fastened everything onto his back. Patting the Maitreya's belly, he said, "I am not like you, who lie down here all day. From now on, I can't keep you company all day every day."

He had decided to go on an expedition, to see if there was anybody else on the island, if there was a way out of here.

Although he was fully aware that in the dense jungle there was danger everywhere, it would not change his determination.

He went out every day in the morning, and came back at night. The soles of his feet were broken, his body was pricked and cut by the thistles and thorns.

The jungle was full of deadly vipers and bugs, there were even carnivorous plants out there. On several occasions he nearly delivered his life, but he did not care. He believed that as long as one was determined, no matter where, one would always find a way out.

Time went on, quickly a month has passed, and he had explored almost every inch on this island.

Other than a pair of sore and swollen feet and a body full of scar, he

found nothing. Not only was this island uninhabited, it was devoid of even foxes, rabbits and all kinds of small critters. If he were someone else, he would be in despair long ago. But he was not.

Although his body was weary, his strength exhausted, he never lose heart. On the thirty-third evening, he suddenly seemed to hear the sound of running water from behind a cliff wall, which was covered with radish vine.

Pushing aside the vines, unexpectedly he found a crevice behind it, barely enough for one person to squeeze himself sideways. But as he walked farther in, the gap gradually widened, and he seemed to see light on the other end, while the sound of running water, which was originally very faint, became gradually clearer.

Finally he found an even clearer spring. Walking upstream, he suddenly saw something floating downstream; it was nothing more than a stem of wilted orchids.

But he still fished the orchids out of the water. He had never seen orchids in this place before, and whenever he found anything unusual, he simply would not let it off. This time he was indeed not disappointed.

Although the orchids were already withered, he could still see the remaining vestige that human hands had trimmed the leaves.

He was so excited that his hands were trembling; there must be people other than him on this island! He suddenly remembered Tao Yuanming's^[1] note on the Garden of the Peaches of Immortality.

After continuing for an hour non-stop, the mountainous terrain indeed suddenly opened up to a wide panorama, the valley was verdant in sweet smelling emerald green foliage, just like a huge, giant garden, adorned with a cluster of pavilions and multi-story buildings.

He dropped down on the soft grass, with heart filled with joy and gratitude, thankful to the Heavens for letting him seeing people once again. As long as he could see people, even if these people killed him, he was most willing. Besides, people who lived in this kind of Garden of the Peaches of Immortality couldn't possibly kill other people!

Now anybody would be convinced that there were people on this island, but perhaps nobody would ever imagine that the very first person Lu Xiaofeng would ever see on this island was unexpectedly Yue Yang.

Not only Yue Yang did not die, he was richly dressed, looked radiant, and seemed to be even more proud than before.

Under the verdant hillside, there was a small pathway made of colorful stone steps. Yue Yang was standing right there, looking coldly at Lu Xiaofeng.

As soon as Lu Xiaofeng saw Yue Yang, he jumped in fright, as if he was seeing a ghost in a bright sunny day. "How can you be here?" he asked in shrill voice.

"If I am not here, where am I supposed to be?" Yue Yang replied in cold voice.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "When the ship capsized, where did you go? How come I could not find you?"

Yue yang said, "When the ship capsized, where did you go? How come I could not find you?"

His question was exactly the same as Lu Xiaofeng's. Indeed when the ship capsized, Lu Xiaofeng did not immediately float up.

Lu Xiaofeng did not have any choice but asking different question, "Who rescued you?"

Yue Yang asked, "Who rescued you?"

Lu Xiaofeng asked, "These days, have you always been here?"

Yue Yang asked, "These days, have you always been here?"

He still did not change even one word, asking Lu Xiaofeng the exact question Lu Xiaofeng has been asking him.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. Yet Yue Yang did not laugh.

They had just escaped from calamity, and met again. It was actually a very rare occurrence. But he did not show the least bit of joy. Unexpectedly he seemed to feel that it would be better if Lu Xiaofeng was dead.

Luckily Lu Xiaofeng did not care at all, he was already aware that this young man was an eccentric person.

"Isn't it true that this place was your destination all along? You were not going to Fusang Islands at all, weren't you? But how did you know that the Old Fox's ship was going to perish right here? How did you get here?"

Even if these questions were asked, he wouldn't get any answer anyway; hence Lu Xiaofeng did not even bother to ask.

Right now he was most concerned about one thing, "Who else are here? The Old Fox, Beef Soup, and the others, are they here?"

Yue Yang coldly said, "You don't need to ask those questions."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Since I am already here, why can't I ask?"

Yue Yang said, "You can return the way you came here, it's not too late."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "Even if you kill me, I will never return!"

Yue Yang's face fell; he said, "In that case I'll kill you!"

His right palm flipped over upward, left palm slashed diagonally down in a circle, right palm suddenly shot out from inside the circle, swiftly chopped down on Lu Xiaofeng's neck.

Not only his style was strange, it was swift and fierce; in this short period of just a bit more than 30 days, his martial art skill seemed to have made tremendous progress.

Actually, there is no fluke in martial art training, but his progress was indeed too quick, just like a miracle. Just this one move, Lu Xiaofeng found it hard to strike back.

In all his life, Lu Xiaofeng has met no one knows how many martial art experts; he really can be considered a veteran of a hundred battles, he had been going through fierce combats for a long time, yet he very seldom see anybody whose martial art skill was higher than this young man.

To his amazement, he had never seen any style with strange variation like this before. He leaped up and made a somersault in the air, and thus retreated eight feet back.

Unexpectedly, Yue Yang did not pursue and attack. "You go back, I won't kill you," he said coldly.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "You kill me, I won't go back."

"You won't regret it?" Yue Yang asked.

"I already told you," Lu Xiaofeng said, "In all my life, I never have any regret."

Yue Yang laughed coldly, he made his move again, and soon discovered

that Lu Xiaofeng's martial art skill was also much higher than he had ever imagined.

No matter how strange the style he used, he always failed to touch even the corner of Lu Xiaofeng's clothes. Occasionally he was so sure that he would succeed, but to his surprise, Lu Xiaofeng's body flashed, and his attack missed!

Lu Xiaofeng had several obvious opportunities to knock him down, but all along he did not take the opportunity, it seemed like he wanted to know the background of Yue Yang's martial art, but it also seemed like he did not have any intention to hurt him.

Yet Yue Yang did not seem to understand, his attacks grew in intensity. Suddenly they heard someone at the end of the flowery path laughed and said, "Honorable guest graces us with his presence, how come you are so inhospitable like this?"

Obviously, there were flowers at the end of the flowery path, one man with his hands behind his back was standing in the middle of the multi-colored cluster of flowers. His face was round, the top of his head was half bald, his face carried a very friendly smile. If he was not wearing exquisite clothing, he would appear like a gardener.

At the sight of this man, Yue Yang immediately halted and retreated step by step. There were also flowers on either side of the flowery path, he retreated to the middle of a cluster of flowers, turned around, and disappeared.

The polite and amiable little old man slowly came forward; he said with

a smile, "Young people are lacking in manners, Sire must never place the blame on him."

Lu Xiaofeng also smiled, "It's all right, he and I are old friends."

The little old man clapped his hands and said, "Old friends meet again, nothing's better than that, at least I will have to prepare some wine for the two of you to celebrate."

He laughed again and said, "Mountain residence is lonely, guests are rare, as soon as there is a little matter to celebrate, we will not miss it; not to mention such a thing like this?"

The way he downplayed the situation unconsciously revealed the peace, happiness, security and contentment in his speech. In Lu Xiaofeng's ears, who have experienced much suffering, it created deep envy.

The little old man asked again, "But I do not know the honored guest's respected surname and great given name."

Lu Xiaofeng immediately introduced himself truthfully. In front of this polite and amiable little old man, nobody could be suspicious.

The little old man nodded and said, "Turns out it's Lu Gongzi [young master], it's a big honor to meet you at last."

Although with his mouth he said that it was an honor to meet him, but it was clear that he did not have the least bit of that sentiment. Lu

Xiaofeng has made his name since he was very young, his name was renowned throughout the world, but in the little old man's ears, it was no different than Zhang San or Li Si [Zhang the third or Li the fourth, respectively], or Ah Mao, Ah Gou [Ol' cat, ol' dog; *i.e.* Tom, Dick and Harry]. This, Lu Xiaofeng had also never met before.

The little old man again said with a laugh, "We happen to have a little celebration today, I was wondering if honored guest would like to honor us with your presence?"

Of course Lu Xiaofeng would like to come, but he still could not bear not to ask, "What are you celebrating today?"

The little old man said, "Today is the day my daughter can eat a meal on her own for the first time, therefore, we all gather here to eat the food she has eaten in the past once again."

If even such trivial matter [orig. 'chicken feather, garlic skin'] was celebrated, unavoidably there would be too many things in the world worth celebrating.

Although in his heart Lu Xiaofeng was having this thought, he did not say anything. He only wished that the food that his daughter had eaten was not rice porridge. These days his mouth was really as tasteless as bird's feed.

The little old man laughed and said, "In your heart Lu Gongzi must have felt funny, if even such trivial matter was celebrated, unavoidably there would be too many things in the world worth celebrating; but let me tell you this: since childhood my daughter is a glutton, therefore, the first

time she can eat by herself, she is asking for a tableful of food and drink."

Although he was echoing what's in Lu Xiaofeng's mind, Lu Xiaofeng was not surprised at all. His thought was natural and normal, anybody who heard such thing would inevitably have the same thought as his.

The little old man laughed again and said, "For many years we have never had a guest who is an outsider in here, today Lu Gongzi suddenly honors us with your presence; apparently it is my daughter's good fortune."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "When I finish your wine and meat, you will know that this is not a good fortune."

The little old man roared in laughter. He cupped his fist to salute the guest.

"Master host is too polite," Lu Xiaofeng said, "If even Master host's respected surname and great given name is not known to me, how can I be called a welcomed guest?"

The little old man said, "I am surnamed Wu, my name is Wu Ming. Wu [吴] of a mouth [口] and a sky [天], Ming [明 - brightness] of the sun [日] and the moon [月]." He laughed aloud again and said, "Actually, at most I only have a mouth that loves to talk and eat good food; I do not have the least bit of the brightness of the sun and the moon."

He laughed, Lu Xiaofeng also laughed.

After going through those difficult days, it was indeed his good fortune to meet such a hospitable, polite, friendly and witty host. Lu Xiaofeng was really happy, even if he did not want to laugh, he simply must laugh.

When the flowery path ended, they turned into another flowery path, passing through a cluster of flowers, they entered another cluster of flowers. On all sides the mountain peaks were green, the clear sky above was blue as if it had just been washed. Ahead, at the end of the nine-bend winding bridge on top of a half qing [approx. 3.5 hectares or 8.25 acres] lotus pond, there was a water pavilion with vermillion railings and green roof tiles.

When they came near, Lu Xiaofeng saw that there were about a dozen or so people already inside the pavilion. Some were standing, some were sitting, some were old, some were young, some were male, some were female, some were dressed in formal and gorgeous ancient attire, some casually draped oversize gown on their bodies.

Everybody was very relaxed, they all looked happy, as if all worries and grieves of the world of mortals were isolated outside the surrounding green hills.

This was life; these were people who understand how to enjoy life. In his heart Lu Xiaofeng was deeply moved, he was overcome with envy, and could only stare in awe.

The little old man said, "People in here do not confine ourselves to ceremony, Lu Gongzi must never be too polite."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Since everybody here does not confine himself to

ceremony, why do you call me Lu Gongzi?"

The little old man roared in laughter. Pulling Lu Xiaofeng's hand, he took him to the nine-bend winding bridge.

A middle-aged man in Tang Dynasty court dress, with a white jade belt around his waist and amethyst and gold court hat on his head, with a cup of wine in his hand, swaggered toward them. He gave the golden cup to Lu Xiaofeng before swaggering away.

The little old man laughed and said, "He is surnamed He. Each time he drinks just a little wine, he would insist that he was the reincarnation of He Zhizhang [659-744, Tang dynasty poet]; hence we might as well call him He Shangshu [high official/government minister]. He loves to call himself Si Ming Kuang Ke [not sure; 四明狂客 lit. four brightness mad guest]."

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed and said, "No wonder he is always drunk; since he is one of the drunken Eight Immortals, not being drunk is wrong."

While his mouth was talking, his eyes were fixed on a woman.

Women who took his attention usually were not ugly.

She may be a bit tall, but the lines on her slender body were soft; her entire body seemed to exude some kind of irresistible charm, the contour of her face was clear, her pair of cat-like eyes seemed to emit some bluish green light just like the ocean. She appeared cold and indifferent, yet

smart; there was also an inexplicable laziness around her, as if she had already grown weary toward life.

Right now she was just leaving the crowd in the water pavilion, and was walking toward them. She was not even close yet, Lu Xiaofeng already felt his throat and his hair dry, a surge of heat rising up from his lower abdomen.

She seemed to also cast him a glance, her cat-like eyes were smiling with contempt and cynical expression.

And then just as quick she turned her head around toward the little old man, and slowly stretched out her hand.

The little old man sighed and said, "You lost everything?"

She nodded. Her jet-black soft and long hair slightly bobbed up and down, just like the waves in the night.

The little old man asked, "How much do you want?"

She held out five fingers, long, slender and powerful fingers, showing off the strength of her innermost being.

"When are you going to pay me back?" the little old man asked.

"Next time," she replied.

"Alright," the little old man said, "Use your jewelry as collateral, when you pay me back you have to add interest."

She agreed immediately, using her two fingers she took a banknote from the little old man's hand, and promptly left without even a single glance toward Lu Xiaofeng.

But the little old man looked at Lu Xiaofeng and smiled. He said, "We have no rules here, but everybody follows one principle strictly."

His eyes still staring at the woman's back, Lu Xiaofeng absent-mindedly asked, "What principle?"

"Earn his own living," the little old man replied.

He went on to explain, "In here we have the best wine and the best cook in the world, no matter which, any enjoyment in here is first-class. But the fee is also very high, people who have no ability to earn a fortune will find it difficult to continue living here."

Lu Xiaofeng's attention has moved away from her body; suddenly he realized that the only property he had was that chamber pot knife.

The little old man laughed and said, "Naturally today you are a guest; as long as you don't gamble with them, you don't need a single wen.[2]"

Today he was a guest, but what about tomorrow?

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly asked, "What are they playing?"

"They are playing dice," the little old man replied, "They love to gamble."

"Can I take a look?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Of course you can," the little old man replied. He laughed even more delightfully, "It's just that if you want to bet, you must be careful toward Sha Man."

Sha Man, what a strange name.

Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Sha Man, is that the one who just borrowed money from you?"

The little old man laughed and said, "She loses fast, but also wins fast. If you are not careful, maybe you'll even lose yourself to her."

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed. Losing himself to a girl like that would not be bad, but naturally he planned on winning.

Gold, pearls and banknotes piled up on the table. The pile in front of Sha Man was the largest, as soon as Lu Xiaofeng came over, she started to win.

Their betting was really simple and delightful, using only three dice, they count the number of dots. 'Leopard six' naturally 'eat 'em all', 'four

five six' is also not small, 'one two three' would definitely lose.

If the first two dice were identical, and the third had six dots, it was almost a guaranteed win.

Unexpectedly she had thrown six dots five times in a row. Her cat-like eyes were shining with jade-green light.

The banker who lost money was a man who started to get fat, he looked no different than any other man you may find in a teahouse or wine shop on any given day. But he was exceptionally calm and collected; although he lost five times in a row, his countenance did not change at all, not even a single bead of sweat was seen on his face.

Their bet was a lot larger than what Lu Xiaofeng had imagined, but the way they gambled was not too sophisticated. They used neither technique nor trick.

Anyone who knew a little bit of trick and came here to gamble was guaranteed to 'return from a rewarding journey'.

Lu Xiaofeng's hand already started to itch.

[1] Tao Yuanming (c. 365-427), Jin dynasty writer and poet.

[2] Wen – copper coin, lowest denomination of money, worth about 1/2g or 1/60 ounce of silver.

Chapter 5 – Return from a rewarding journey

For the last several years, Lu Xiaofeng had not gambled for money. Originally, he was a gambler, when he was six or seven years old, he already knew how to play with dice. By the time he was sixteen or seventeen, not a single gimmick in gambling that he did not know.

Lead-loaded dice, mercury-loaded dice, iron dice with magnet underneath the bowl, in his eyes, all these tricks were merely a child's plaything.

In his hands, ordinary six-sided dice could become like living objects, which were very obedient to him. If he wanted the dice to show red dots, the dice would not dare to show a single black dot.

Gambling is just the same as drinking wine, to a wanderer like him, not only it was a way of venting off his emotion, it was also a way to earn a living.

He had not been gambling recently, not because he had won too much and thus nobody dared to gamble against him, but because he himself had completely lost his interest!

Naturally he no longer had to do it for a living, so he was able to look for more excitement in life.

But now the situation was different; he wanted to stay here, hence he had to have a skill to earn a fortune.

Now it looked like he simply had to stay here, but the only opportunity to earn a lot of money in this place seemed to be in those three dice.

The banker grabbed the dice and knocked it at the edge of a large bowl, creating 'ding, ding' sound. "Place your bet," he shouted, "The bigger the better."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly said, "I bet five hundred taels."

Although he did not have five hundred taels, he was confident that he would not lose.

It's a pity that others did not have any confidence in him. The banker cast him a cold glance and said, "How come I did not see your five hundred taels?"

"Because I have not taken it out," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"We have a rule here," the banker said, "Only money that can be seen that counts."

Lu Xiaofeng took something out, but it was the knife he made from the chamber pot.

The banker said, "You use this knife to put down five hundred taels?"

"Uh huh," Lu Xiaofeng said.

The banker said, "I fail to see how this knife could worth five hundred taels."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "You fail to see, because you have never seen this kind of knife."

"So this knife is special?" the banker asked.

"Very special," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"What's so special?" the banker asked.

"This knife is made of a chamber pot," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

He could not help laughing on his own joke, but nobody else did. The six people gambled in here, although in term of status, gender and age they were all different, they all had one thing in common; they all appeared amazingly cold, they did not even laugh.

Right now they all looked at Lu Xiaofeng, with gaze that looked like they were looking at a clown.

'It's hard to put an ashamed blade back into its sheath'. Lu Xiaofeng also felt that taking the knife back was very difficult.

While he was still thinking of how to recover from this awkwardness, suddenly he saw a hand pushing five hundred taels his way, and picked up his knife.

A very nice looking hand, long and slender, yet powerful fingers; although it was a bit like a man's hand, it was still very beautiful.

Lu Xiaofeng let out a breath, he cast her a grateful glance as he said with a laugh, "Finally someone who knows what's good and what's not."

Sha Man coldly said, "If I know what's good, I won't lend you five hundred taels."

Her face did not show any emotion, "I give you a loan, just because you seem to bring a bit of good luck to me. This time my stake is a bit high, therefore, I won't let you leave."

Gamblers are usually realistic; she seemed to be a typical gambler.

The banker let out a low shout, "Make a kill!" and threw the dice into the bowl. Two dice stopped at six, the third was still rolling incessantly.

The banker shouted, "Six", other people called, "One", but Lu Xiaofeng knew that the die would stop at 'three'.

Because he had two fingers pressed on the bottom surface of the table. He had a very high confidence on his two fingers.

He hoped the banker would lose a bit. This man apparently can afford to lose.

The die stop, it was indeed three dots.

Three dots cannot be considered too low, unexpectedly two people could not even beat three dots. When it was Sha Man's turn, she threw a six.

She could not afford to lose, even her jewelry had been pawned out.

Lu Xiaofeng's two fingers, not only they were able to catch a stab of lightning-fast sword, sometimes they could be used to stop the dice at any dots he wanted it to stop.

He was not ashamed of the way he dealt with this matter at all! Let those who could afford to lose lost a bit to those who could not afford to lose. There's absolutely nothing wrong about it.

Now the dice were in his hand. He wanted a pair of three and a four. Four dots beats three, the winning was just right, plus it would not raise any suspicion.

Of course he did not need other people's hand under the table to help him, although he had not practiced for a long time, he was sure the dice would obey his command.

He was sure, absolutely sure.

'Ding, dang!' the dice fell into the bowl. The first die stopped at three, the second also stopped at three, the third would definitely be a four.

He looked at the continuously rolling die, just like a father or a mother looking at an obedient child. And now he could already see the four dots on the face of the die, flashing red, alluring and beautiful red, as beautiful as the shining white five hundred taels of silver.

When the dice stopped, the silver would be in hands.

Who would have thought that at the last second, the die jumped and landed on two dots?

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbstruck. Even in his dream he would never imagine that there were martial art experts on this table, whose skill was most probably even higher than his.

Sha Man gave him a cold look, "Although you brought me good luck, your own luck is not good."

The person who played trick on the dice just now, definitely was not her; she had already lost a lot, and Lu Xiaofeng was helping her to get it back.

The banker was collecting the winning,

Not only this man has lost, he had lost a lot; if he was capable of controlling the dice, he would not have lost.

It did not look like anybody else either, Lu Xiaofeng really could not see

who the expert was.

He was like a mute eating Chinese goldthread [*coptis chinensis*], unspeakably bitter; or like a blind eating wonton, who let the belly do the counting.

If only he could do it one more time, he was confident he would be able to see it. If only he paid a bit more attention, he was confident he would not lose.

He was very confident. It's a pity he did not have any gambling capital anymore, that polite and friendly little old man had suddenly disappeared, as if he was afraid Lu Xiaofeng would come to him to borrow money.

A very young man, but kept two strips of moustache above his lips, suddenly laughed and said, "Both of us have moustache, let us be friends."

Unexpectedly, he really did 'help a lame dog over a stile' by handing him out a five hundred taels banknote.

Lu Xiaofeng was greatly delighted; he was about to take the banknote, when the moustache's hand pulled it back, "Where's the knife?"

"What knife?"

"Like the one you had just now."

No knife, no silver; therefore, Lu Xiaofeng could only force a smile, "A knife like that, even if you search everywhere in the whole world, I am afraid there is only one."

The moustache sighed, he placed the banknote on the table. The banker had already tossed the dice. Unexpectedly it was a 'one two three', he had to pay everybody.

Lu Xiaofeng could only feel the bitter taste in his mouth. While he was thinking of getting some wine and thinking about his next step, he turned around and saw the little old man was standing by the wine and food table, looking at him with a smile on his face.

There were all kinds of wine on the table. Lu Xiaofeng picked up a Green Bamboo Leaf and poured some for himself. He intentionally did not want to look at the little old man.

But the little old man asked him, "How's your luck?"

Lu Xiaofeng said indifferently, "Can't be considered too bad, it's just that when I ought to win I did not win, when I ought not to lose, yet I lost."

The little old man sighed and said, "In this world, there are a lot of things just like that. If one has too much confidence in certain matter, one would be careless instead; hence one lost when he ought to win. But as long as there is a second chance, one would have everything under control."

It was exactly what Lu Xiaofeng had in mind, but he said it first.

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes brightened; he said, "If you agree to invest, let me play again, we'll split the win."

The little old man said, "But what if you lose?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "If I lose I'll pay you."

"How are you going to pay?" the little old man asked, "Using that incomparably unique chamber pot knife of yours? Too bad that chamber pot knife is not even yours anymore."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "No matter what, I can't possibly lose anyway. Please lend me ten thousand taels, after this round, I will definitely give you back fifteen thousand taels."

Basically, he was not this kind of poor, terrible and extremely greedy gambling demon, who would sell his own wife just to be able to gamble, but right now he was too fired up and definitely did not accept his lost. Besides, in his eyes, ten thousand taels was nothing much, he has always squandered money like dirt, and has never had any regards for wealth.

Funny thing is, the more he acted like that, the easier it was for him to borrow money instead. Even the little old man's heart was a bit moved. He said hesitantly, "If by any chance you still lose, then what?"

"Then I will belong to you," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Unexpectedly the little old man no longer say anything, immediately he handed him ten thousand taels.

Lu Xiaofeng was greatly delighted, "Don't worry, I won't make you regret it."

The little old man sighed. "I am afraid it will be you who regret it," he said.

The banker had not changed. After Lu Xiaofeng left, he repeatedly threw several big dots, and managed to pull back his capital somewhat.

But Sha Man was on a steady decline, she lost nearly everything. Seeing Lu Xiaofeng came back, unexpectedly a smile appeared on her as-cold-as-ice-and-frost face, "That old man lent you some gambling capital? Did he trust you?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "He did not trust me as a person, he just believed that this time I will have a change of fortune."

Sha Man said, "I also want you to have a change of fortune, and thus redeem your knife. This knife, nobody wants it even for five fen."

The banker has called the bets, Lu Xiaofeng said, "Let me win this one first, and then we'll talk."

At first he wanted to fold the banknote on the corner to denote a thousand taels bet, but at the last second he suddenly put the entire banknote down as his stake.

Gambling demons who lose money, usually lost all at once like this.

The banker gave him a cold look, and then threw the dice. He got two dots, but unexpectedly his countenance still did not change.

Several people took turns throwing the dice, some won, some lost; Sha Man threw a six, she could not help looking at Lu Xiaofeng and said with a laugh, "You seem to bring me good luck again."

When she was not laughing, Lu Xiaofeng's heart was already moved; as soon as she laughed, Lu Xiaofeng was even more 'spirit and soul upside-down'. Suddenly he reached out to grab her hand and said, "Since I brought you good luck, I wonder if you could lend me some?"

She wanted to shake her hand free, but Lu Xiaofeng was holding her too tightly; her countenance immediately fell, "My hand is not the dice, why are you pulling me?"

Although she was speaking with a straight face, everybody could see that she was not really angry.

Lu Xiaofeng slowly let her hand go, he grabbed the dice. Originally he only had eighty percent confidence, but now he was a hundred percent confident. "Leopard," he shouted.

To defeat a two-dot, a leopard was really unnecessary. Indeed, when an expert wanted to beat a two-dot, at most he would only need a four-dot. Even without any trick, to beat a two-dot is not difficult. But right now Lu Xiaofeng seemed to suddenly turn into a child; when someone whom he liked was standing at the side, without any rhyme or reason a child would do a double somersault.

Right now Lu Xiaofeng's mood was more or less the same, wholeheartedly he wanted to show off in front of her by throwing three sixes, a leopard.

With a 'ding-a-ling' the dice were thrown into the bowl, his hand already reached the table. This time, even if someone was playing a trick, he was confident that he would be able to turn the dice back.

Two dice had already stopped; naturally both showed a six-dot. The third one was still rolling in the bowl. The banker's eyes were fixed at the dice, he coldly said, "The die is possessed."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "Where's the ghost? Let us all try to find it." Exerting his strength, the table suddenly rose up from the floor.

The man with a moustache who wanted to make friends with Lu Xiaofeng earlier originally had his hands pressed on the table. As the table was lifted up, suddenly there was a 'poof', two pieces of palm-shaped wood fell to the ground, unexpectedly his pair of hands went through the table.

The bowl was still on the table, the die was still rolling inside the bowl.

A gust of wind blew, two pieces of wood that fell to the ground unexpectedly turned into small bits like cotton wadding. In a blink of an eye it was blown away by the wind.

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes were originally fixed onto the dice, yet he could not help looking at the moustache's eyes. He really could not see that this young man, who was dressed in fancy clothes like a rich man, his hands unexpectedly mastered the 'Bone-transforming Cotton Palm', a long-lost martial art skill of the wulin world.

'Cotton Palm' was Wudang's consummate skill, an internal, orthodox school martial art, but the addition of the two words 'Bone-transforming' in front of the 'Cotton Palm' made it a completely different martial art.

This kind of palm force was not only sinister and frightening, it was very difficult to master. After it was trained to perfection, when the palm hit a human body, the person hit would lose consciousness, but four hours later the palm force flared up, the bones in his entire body would turn soft like cotton, even a deity would not be able to save him. Compared to Tibetan Tantra's 'Big Hand Print' or western region's Xingxiuhai's 'Heaven-Destroying-Earth-Decimating Hand', it was a lot more formidable.

Ever since the death of Hua Gu Xian Ren [Bone Transforming Daoist Immortal], who in the past had solitarily broken into Xingxiuhai, entered the Chao Tian Gong [imperial heaven palace] in the night, forcefully killed the Great Lama of the Yellow Hat, this kind of palm power had never appeared in Jianghu, but somehow this moustache was able to master the skill.

Lu Xiaofeng could not figure it out, he did not have time to think about it either.

The die was still rolling inside the bowl, every time it nearly stopped, an old man with white hair, who had been sitting to Lu Xiaofeng's left, flicked his finger lightly, the die would roll even faster.

This man's hair was completely white, his manner dignified manner; he looked just like an old pedant who intensively read books of poetry and history. All along he had been sitting formally next to Lu Xiaofeng. Among those present, he was the only one who never look at Sha Man in the eye.

In all his life Lu Xiaofeng was most afraid of dealing with this kind of scholarly gentleman; thereupon all along he never paid him any attention either.

Until now. When the die was about to stop, Lu Xiaofeng suddenly heard a 'chi', a gust of sharp breeze streaked pass his ear. Unexpectedly the wind came from the old man's middle finger.

His hands were thin and yellow like dried candle, he kept his fingernails more than a cun [approx. an inch] long. Presumably because they were soaked in some liquid drug, the ten fingernails were always curled in, but as soon as he flicked, the curled fingernail suddenly turned straight as a ramrod, sparkling and translucent, and spotlessly white, shiny like the blade of a knife.

Could it be the 'Finger Blade', the combination of Zhang Bianyin Clan's 'One Yang Finger' and Huashan's 'Divine Flicking Finger Skill'? It was also a long-lost martial art skill of the wulin, so much so that even Lu Xiaofeng had never seen it.

His own 'Lingxi Finger' [lit. supernaturally sharp] was also a consummate skill without equal throughout the world. Suddenly he stretched out his two fingers and made a clipping motion in the air toward the die. The continuously rolling die suddenly stopped, the top surface appeared dark, it seemed to produce at least a five-dot.

Who would have thought that in that split second, before anybody could see clearly the number of dots on the top surface, the banker suddenly puckered his lips and sucked the air? The die suddenly jumped up from the bowl.

The white-haired old man flicked his middle finger again, 'poof!' the die was unexpectedly exploded; fine powder rained down, and it still fell into the bowl, but nobody could see how many points were there.

Lu Xiaofeng has been gambling here and there, he did not even know how many times he had gambled, but it was the first time that he ever saw this kind of thing. Now how did they decide winning or losing? Could the banker be considered losing? Even he did not know how to handle this matter.

Sha Man suddenly turned toward Lu Xiaofeng and said, "Two sixes, plus one dot, how many dots are there?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Still one dot."

'Why is it still one dot?' Sha Man asked.

Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Because whatever the last die produces, that is the one that counts."

"What if the last die does not have any dots?" Sha Man asked again.

"No dots means no dots," Lu Xiaofeng answered.

"Which one is bigger, no dots or one dot?" Sha Man asked.

"Naturally one dot is bigger," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Isn't two-dot bigger than one-dot?" Sha Man asked.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, "Two-dot is bigger than one-dot, it is also bigger than no-dot."

Actually, as soon as she asked the first question, he already understood where she was going. If it were someone else who asked, he would have had at least several dozen way of coping with this problem.

Lu Xiaofeng was resourceful, witty and full of clever tricks; a lot of people in Jianghu got a headache just by meeting him. But in front of this girl with long, cat-like pair of eyes, he was unable to come out with the least bit of trick.

Because basically he did not want to play trick in front of her. If she wanted him to lose, then so be it. What's the harm in him losing?

A trifling ten thousand taels, how can it be compared to just one smile of hers?

Sha Man did indeed smile, "Since two-dot is bigger than no-dot, you lost this ten thousand taels."

"I did lose," Lu Xiaofeng admitted.

"Are you feeling bad of losing?" Sha Man asked.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "Forget ten thousand taels, even a hundred thousand, eighty thousand, I won't feel bad."

He was not bragging. But as soon as he said that, he realized that right now he could not afford to lose even ten or eight taels.

Unfortunately, the banker had already swept away his banknote. Still with unchanged countenance he coldly said, "If you have money, place your bet; otherwise, go away."

Lu Xiaofeng had to go away.

The little old man did not seem to pay any attention of what was going on at the gambling table on this side. He was still sitting on that side, sipping his wine quietly. His face showed contentment, as if he was happily thinking that very soon he would receive Lu Xiaofeng's fifteen thousand taels.

Lu Xiaofeng braced himself and came over. "What are you drinking?" he tried to strike a conversation,

"Green Bamboo Leaf," the little old man replied.

"You like Green Bamboo Leaf too?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Actually, I don't drink too often," the little old man replied, "But now I seem to be infected by you."

"Good," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Let me toast you three cups."

"I am afraid three cups are enough to make me drunk," the little old man said.

"One drunkenness dissolves a thousand worries," Lu Xiaofeng said, "There are too few opportunities in this life to get drunk. Come, drink!"

"You are still very young," the little old man said, "What worry do you have?"

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "I just lost someone else's money, inevitably my heart is a bit uncomfortable."

The little old man chuckled and said, "It's not someone else's money, it's yours."

Lu Xiaofeng was astonished and delighted at the same time, "Is it really mine?" he asked.

The little old man said, "Since I already loaned it to you, naturally it is yours."

Lu Xiaofeng was greatly delighted, "I can't believe that you are such a generous person."

The little old man laughed and said, "Actually, such generosity can't be considered a big deal, it's just that ..." he continued very slowly, "Although the money belongs to you, but you belong to me."

"My surname is Lu, yours is Wu," Lu Xiaofeng cried out, "You are not my son, and I am not your old man; how can I belong to you?"

The little old man spoke matter-of-factly, "Because you haven't given me fifteen thousand taels, you have no choice but to pay me with yourself; a real man gives his words, it's like fast horse being whipped. In order for you to keep your reputation, I think you cannot not do it."

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbstruck. With a bitter laugh he said, "I am a drunkard, and a lecher, and a glutton, and a gambler. I spend money like flowing water. If I belong to you, you will have to feed me."

The little old man said, "I can afford it."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "But I still don't understand, what do you want a big bad egg like me for?"

The little old man laughed and said, "I have too much money, I was looking for someone to help me spending it, so that I won't have to suffer alone."

"You think spending money is a suffering?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

With a grim expression the little old man said, "Why is it not a suffering? If you drink too much, the next day you'll have a splitting headache, just like if you have a serious illness. If you gamble too much, not only it's nerve-wrecking, as if sitting on pins and needles, when your luck is not good, you may very well be very angry that it'll kill you. If you indulge on sensual pleasure too much ..."

He sighed, and then continued, "This kind of activity can damage your body. For old people like me, I do not dare to even mention it."

"Other than spending money," Lu Xiaofeng asked, "What else do you want me to do?"

The little old man said, "You are still young, your body is strong, your martial art skill is not bad; the number of things I want you to do can be uncountable."

When he spoke the sentence 'your martial art skill is not bad', his voice seemed to carry a hint of unspeakable contempt. It does not matter whether he really had that kind of feeling or it was only in Lu Xiaofeng's imagination; it did not mean much anyway.

Lu Xiaofeng had made his name since he was a teenager, he was able to roam the Jianghu unhindered; although it cannot be said that he was unequalled under the heavens, he had never met anybody who can really defeat him. Just like he had never suffered any loss in gambling, if anybody told him that he was no good, of course he would ten-thousand times refuse to accept.

But today he threw the dice twice, and suffered losses twice. If he said that it was only because other people were playing trick, then why didn't he play trick himself?

The moustache's 'Bone-transforming Cotton Palm' and the old man's 'Finger Blade' were consummate martial art skill, which were rarely seen. Finally the banker who puckered his lips and sucked a die seven chi [approx. 7 ft/2 m] away, while the other two dice next to it did not move the slightest bit. This kind of qigong [chikung] ability was even more incredible.

This place looked like an auspicious and peaceful Garden of the Peaches of Immortality, unexpectedly it was a place of hidden dragons and crouching tigers.

And then there was this polite and amiable little old man. He looked like a sincere and naïve man, while in fact he was able to penetrate other people's mind in just one glance; it was indeed 'great intelligence may appear to be stupidity', the kind of person who 'disguises himself as a pig to eat a tiger'. Perhaps this game of chance was a trap that he had carefully prepared beforehand and now Lu Xiaofeng had fallen into it. It was still unclear what kind of strange things he would want Lu Xiaofeng to do.

Whatever it was, certainly it could not be a good thing.

Lu Xiaofeng thought about it over and over; the more he thought, the more he felt uneasy. He even started to think that he should have not been here at all.

The little old man laughed and said, "Now in your heart you must feel regret, you feel that you should not have come here; yet because you obviously cannot guess what trick we are playing, and you are unavoidably dying to find out, you will hate yourself if you just leave."

He hit the nail on the head, he accurately spelled out what was in Lu Xiaofeng's mind. But Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said in a loud voice, "You're wrong, totally wrong."

"What do you mean 'wrong'?" the little old man asked.

"What you just said is totally wrong," Lu Xiaofeng replied. He downed a cup of wine, and picked a piece of beef and munched happily. And then he said with a laugh, "Here we have wine and we have meat, we also have fairy-like beautiful women, plus you already prepared money for me to spend. Why would I be dissatisfied? Why would I regret it?"

With a smile on his face the little old man looked at him and said, "Because in your heart you are still wondering, what exactly do I want you to do?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed aloud and said, "People like me, what can't I do? Even if you wanted me to kill, I'd kill one stab at a time, I won't even

bother to bury him."

"Is that right?" the little old man said.

"Of course it's true!" Lu Xiaofeng replied.

The little old man stared at him. His eyes suddenly revealed some kind of strange expression. He smiled and said, "As long as you can remember what you said today, I guarantee a life time of peace and happiness for you."

Although he was laughing again, the tone of his voice was very serious, as if he really wanted Lu Xiaofeng to kill for him.

But there were hidden dragons and crouching tigers in here, martial art experts were as numerous as the clouds. That 'Bone-transforming Cotton Palm' and 'Finger Blade' were extremely insidious; to kill people, nothing could be better than these, why would he want to 'abandon the near but seek the far' and look for someone else?

Lu Xiaofeng finally decided not to think about it. He already sampled three different dishes: a plate of thin cut beef, a bowl of slow-cooked stew of beef brisket braised in soy sauce, and a dish of stir-fried tender beef in oyster sauce. Who would have thought that as his chopsticks picked another piece, the fourth dish was still beef? It was a hot and spicy orange beef.

The soup was a whole beef brisket steamed in its own broth, the meat was braised beef tripe, tender but not soft, the cooking heat was

controlled just right; and then there was moist thin-cut beef, simmered in sweet fat, mixed well with the seasoning, and stirred into the soup, sprinkled with pepper just before it was served. The soup and the meat were tender; these were seldom-seen kind of food.

The rest of the dishes were simmer-fried ox tongue, raw-sautéed beef tripe, roast beef heart, beef meatballs, ox head stewed in red sauce, stewed ox tail, wolfberry [lycium chinense] bull's penis, and then egg-shaped deep-fried beef brain. All were tasty dishes. It's just that everything was beef, so that even if they were tastier, after a while it became boring.

"Is beef here as abundant as silver?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The little old man said, "Today's feast is entirely beef, because my daughter especially loves to eat beef."

Lu Xiaofeng finally remembered that the dishes today were all the food that his daughter has eaten until the first day she was able to eat by herself. At that time she was at most three or five years old, how could they prepare such a big table full of beef dishes?

Lu Xiaofeng sighed inwardly. It seemed that this little old man was a monster.

The little old man said, "Actually, she does not have any other peculiarity. It's just that each meal she has to have beef. Even after several dozen years, she won't get tired of eating beef. If anyone thinks that she is a monster, it would be a mistake."

Lu Xiaofeng stared at him hard; he could not bear not to ask, "Whatever I am thinking, you know everything?"

The little old man laughed and said, "This kind of 'observing someone's words and gestures' skill, I do not dare to be unduly humble."

Lu Xiaofeng rolled his eyes. He said, "Do you know what I am thinking right now?"

The little old man said, "Actually, you are trying to think about some bizarre thing to stump me on purpose, but in all honesty you are dying to take a look at my beef-eating daughter."

"Wrong," Lu Xiaofeng said, "You are not marrying your daughter to me; why would I want to see her?" While his mouth denied it, in his heart he could not help admiring him. Against his will, he asked, "The feast today is for her, why is it that all along she did not appear?"

"Who's 'she'?" the little old man asked.

"Naturally your daughter," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Since you didn't even want to see her, why did you ask?" the little old man said.

Lu Xiaofeng was speechless.

Although this little old man was friendly and looked honest on the

outside, he was actually a wily old fox. Compared to the Old Fox, he was several hundred times more cunning.

The little old man continued, "Too bad that even if you really don't want to see her, sooner or later you will still see her."

"So I cannot not see her even if I want to?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"You can't," the little old man replied.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The little old man said, "Because if you turn around right now, you will see her."

Lu Xiaofeng turned around, and saw Beef Soup.

Naturally there was no beef soup on her face right now. Had it not been for Lu Xiaofeng has looked at her carefully, he could never have seen her as a miserable Beef Soup, who had been bullied around by other people.

She has now completely changed her appearance; from a little servant girl who cooks meals for others, she was now a little princess who makes people want to cook meals for her. Not only that, she was the Princess among many princesses. Anybody who saw her would feel that if they were given the opportunity to cook for her, it would be a huge honor.

People can change.

Lu Xiaofeng knew that a lot of people changed. Some changed from abject poverty into rich and powerful. Some changed from being a gentleman to a lowly person. Some changed from being a hero to a coward. Yet some others changed from wealth to dirt poor, from lowly person to a gentleman, from coward to a hero. But he has never seen anybody who changed so fast, so much, like her.

Practically she seemed to completely shed her mortal body and exchange her bones.

If not because Lu Xiaofeng had seen her up, close and personal; even parts of her body that other people were not supposed to see, he would not have believed that she was indeed the Beef Soup.

Beef Soup stared at him coldly, as if she had never seen him before.

"Do you know her?" the little old man asked.

"At first I thought I knew her," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"And now?" the little old man asked.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "Now it looks like she does not know me, and I don't know her either."

Beef Soup neither confirmed nor denied. She seemed to hear this exchange, yet she also seemed not to hear anything.

The little old man no longer paid any attention to Lu Xiaofeng, he walked over and pulled her hand; his eyes were brimming with love. "I told you to go to sleep a bit early," he said, "Why did you slip out again?"

Beef Soup said, "I heard the maids said that just now someone is coming back; I wonder if there is any news of the Ninth (older) Brother?"

The little old man winked. "What do you think?" he asked.

Beef Soup's eyes brightened immediately. "I knew it," she said, "Ninth Brother will never forget me."

"I was going to tell you tomorrow," the little old man said, "Not only Ol' Ninth sent some news, he had his new assistant, Mu Yiban [Mu – wood, Yiban – one half], brought some gifts for you."

Beef Soup's expression brightened like blooming flower, her eyes shone, as if she had just turned into somebody else. "Where's this man Mu Yiban?" she asked, "Quickly tell him to come, bring the Ninth Brother's gift as well."

The little old man smiled; he waved his hand and snapped his fingers. Immediately sixteen bare-chested, bald men, wearing only leather pants in Kunlun-slave style, crossed the nine-bend winding bridge, carrying eight huge wooden chests. In front of them was a man, with one arm, one leg, walking with the help of a steel cane. His right leg was cut at the base, his right arm was cut from the shoulder, there was a long blade scar on his face, from the right eye all the way down to his cheek. Not only his right eye was gone, even his nose was cut in half, and one of his ears was

gone.

It was unclear whether this man was originally ugly or handsome, but now he looked unspeakably mysterious and terrifying.

But when Beef Soup saw him, she looked very happy; she said with a laugh, "Ninth Brother has told me about you, you must be Mu Yiban."

Mu Yiban bent his left knee in respectful salute and said, "Xiaoren [lit. little/lowly one] Mu Yiban pays his respect to the Princess."

Before he could kneel down, Beef Soup has already reached out to help him up. She was a lot more polite toward this ugly and strange handicapped man compared to toward Lu Xiaofeng, presumably because she was looking at her Ninth Brother's face; 'love the house and its crow'.

Lu Xiaofeng watched from afar, he had a bad feeling in his heart. He saw under the sunshine her hands were spotlessly white, soft and beautiful, totally different from the greased-covered hands he had seen before. Thinking about what happened in the bathroom of the Fox Den the other day, he could not stop his heart from beating a bit faster.

Mu Yiban had already supervised the shiny-black clothed Kunlun slaves opening five chests. The chests were full of silk and satin, rouge and face powder. When the fifth chest was opened, pearls and jewels dazzled the eyes; unexpectedly inside the chest was all kinds of emeralds, agate, gold, pearls, jewels and jade.

Not a single one of these things was not women's favorite, when

ordinary girl saw this, perhaps she would have fainted with joy early on.

But Beef Soup did not even cast a single glance; instead, she pouted and said, "Ninth Brother is not unaware that I do not cherish these things, so why did he deliberately order you to send them here?"

Mu Yiban laughed and said, "Princess, look at what's inside these three chests?"

His laugh seemed to be very mysterious, so that even Lu Xiaofeng could not help feeling curious. What could possibly make a girl's heart happier than pearls and jewels?

When the three chests were opened, Lu Xiaofeng almost could not refrain from crying out.

The chests unexpectedly contained people, one chest contained one person. Out of the three people, Lu Xiaofeng recognized two.

The first had gray hair, with majestic appearance; although he was stuffed inside the chest for a long time, when he stood up he was still as straight as a ramrod. Unexpectedly he was the Zongbiaotou [head escort] of the Qunying [lit. crowd of heroes] Escort Agency, the 'Iron Palm Golden Saber' Situ Gang [see also Chapter 1]. This man's Iron Sand Palm has been trained to near perfection. His 'Golden-backed Mountain-splitting Saber', with the 'Five-Tiger Gate-breaking' saber technique, had even less opponents in Jianghu. How could he be caught and stuffed inside a chest?

The second person was a slim, heroic-looking man, the Taiyang acupoints on both sides of his temples were bulging out; apparently he was a prominent Wulin character expert in both internal and external martial arts.

The one that really surprised Lu Xiaofeng was the third person.

This man's bare feet only wore straw sandals, his attire consisted of old, worn and greasy kasaya[1]. His round face unexpectedly was still smiling. To Lu Xiaofeng's shock, this person was one of the 'Four Great Monks', in fact, he ranked the third; he was none other than the Honest Monk.

Nobody knew for sure whether this monk's honesty was real or fake, but everybody knew that his martial art skill was very high; this fact was definitely not a fake. If any Jianghu bandits provoked him, although he would always show a smiling face without the slightest hint of anger, this man would often go in the middle of the night and take the offender's life.

Therefore, the number of people in Jianghu who dared to mess with this monk have recently become less and less. Even Lu Xiaofeng would have headache every time he saw him.

For the last half a year or so, he suddenly disappeared, nobody knew what he was doing, yet against all expectation he suddenly appeared from inside the chest. The man who could put him into the chest must have had a shockingly high-level of martial art skill. If Lu Xiaofeng did not see it with his own eyes, he would definitely not believe it.

Honest Monk did not seem to see him, putting his palms together, he

giggled while looking at Beef Soup.

Seeing these three men, Beef Soup was extremely amused; she also laughed and said, "Strange things happen every year, but it happens especially a lot this year; how could a monk suddenly appear from inside the chest?"

Honest monk said, "Little Miss vents off the anger from your breast, big monk is stuffed into the chest. Amitufo! Shanzai, shanzai![2]"

Mu Yiban said, "Ninth Young Master knew that these three men have offended Princess; therefore, he ordered Xiaoren to deliver them here pronto, so that Princess can vent off your anger."

He kept calling Princess this and Princess that, Beef Soup unexpectedly felt no qualms in accepting the appellation, just as if she was really a Princess[3].

Mu Yiban continued, "But I wonder how is Princess going to vent off your anger?"

Beef Soup winked and said, "I haven't thought about it, how about you give me an idea?"

Mu Yiban said, "It depends on whether Princess wants to vent your anger in a big way or in a small way."

Beef Soup seemed to think that his idea was very amusing. "Pfft," she broke into giggle and asked, "How do I vent in a small way?"

Mu Yiban said, "Take off their pants and flog them heavily seventy, eighty times, and that's it."

"How about big way?" Beef Soup asked.

Mu Yiban said, "Cut their heads, dry them in the sun, and then give them to Xiaoren to accompany my wine."

Beef Soup laughed and said, "Good idea, really good idea. No wonder Ninth Brother likes you."

Mu Yiban's ideas were indeed sinister; having their heads cut was all right, having their heads cut, dried in the sun, and eaten to down the wine was already very bad, but having their pants pulled down and spanked, it was even more difficult to bear than death.

The tall and slim, with heroic appearance, black-clothed man's face was already devoid of any color; the Honest Monk was still giggling without showing any care. Situ Gang was like a raging inferno, his temper was the worst; he said in stern voice, "Since we have already fallen into your hands, you want to kill, you want to cut, I won't knit a single eyebrow; but if you deliberately humiliate me, I ... even in my death I won't let you go!"

Situ Gang was able to move unhindered in Jianghu, he was not the kind of people who would easily give up, but his last sentence, 'even in my death I won't let you go', was spoken with total despair. It was obvious that he knew that he was not Beef Soup's match, and would rather die.

In a very sweet voice Beef Soup said, "When you are alive you are helpless to do anything to me, when you are dead, how are you going to not letting me go? Are you telling me that you want to be a big-headed ghost and come in the middle of the night to strangle my neck?"

Situ Gang gnashed his teeth, cold sweats dripped down his head like rain, suddenly he let out a roar and his palm smashed down heavily on his own tianling [heaven spirit] acupoint on the top of his head.

The five fingers on his hand were of almost the same length, his fingernails were cut short, there was a faint darkness at the hollow of his palm. His Iron Sand Palm has been trained to at least 80% perfection, when this palm smashed down, although it was smashed on his own head, it was equally deadly.

Who would have thought that Beef Soup flashed forward, like an orchid her fine, long, tender and beautiful fingers lightly brushed, Situ Gang's arm immediately drooped down, and was unable to move at all.

Mu Yiban immediately cheered in loud voice, "Good martial art skill!"

Beef Soup said drily, "This is just the simplest move of the 'Adaptable Orchid Hand', can't be considered any good martial art skill!"

She spoke it lightly, but Lu Xiaofeng who heard it was shocked. This 'Adaptable Orchid Hand', although the name was beautiful, it was actually one of the most terrifying martial art skills of the Wulin world. It dislocated the tendon and separating the arteries and veins, and caused invisible injury to its victim. Situ Gang's injury did not look serious, but actually his arm was crippled forever, once the wound flared up, the pain

would be unbearable. Other than chopping off the arm from the base, there was no second way to provide relief.

Situ Gang's face already turned deathly grey; he shouted, "You ... you won't even let me die?"

Although he shouted loudly, his voice was trembling; obviously in his heart he was extremely frightened.

Beef Soup sighed; she said, "A live dog is better off than a dead lion; why do you want to die? Even if you are aware that you have offended me, you are guilty of capital crimes; you can always find someone else to die in your place."

Situ Gang was startled; he could not help but asked, "What do you mean die in my place?"

Beef Soup said, "You may choose anybody in here, as long as you can win over him by one move or half a stance, I will kill him in your place."

Mu Yiban said, "In my opinion, among the people in here, he won't dare to find a single one."

Beef Soup laughed and said, "A single person he won't dare to find; how about half a person?"

Mu Yiban sighed. He said, "Thinking back and forth, I think at the most he would only dare to find me, half a person."

Situ Gang roared, "That's right, I definitely am looking for you." Amidst the sound of his shout, his palm already shot out.

Qunying Escort Agency's prowess reached out far and wide, the Head Escort's annual salary was fifty-thousand shi [not sure what it is], approximately the same as a one-pin rank high-ranking official of the imperial court. [See Deer and Cauldron, translated by yours truly, for more information on 'pin' ranks.]

His virtuous wife was tender and sweet, just before his departure they enjoyed an evening of passion together just like newlywed. His sons and daughters were intelligent and filial, his eldest daughter was already betrothed to the eldest grandson of his maternal uncle, the great hero of the Central Plains, Xiong Tianjian. The two families were well-matched in terms of social status, the two people were matched made in heaven. As long as he could stay alive, naturally he did not want to die. Although his right arm could not move, fortunately the skill he trained could be used with just one arm. This one palm strike carried profound and ferocious force; he was indeed worthy of his title, 'Golden Saber Hundred Victory, Iron Palm Without Rival'.

Mu Yiban only had half a person left, slanting his body slightly, the steel cane under his ribs shot upward. Unexpectedly he was using the steel cane like a sword. The move 'Laughing toward the Southern Sky' was the sword technique of Hainan Pai [Sect], handed down directly from their founder.

Hainan sword style was derived from the horizontal brush stroke in calligraphy, since he was just half a person, coincidentally he was able to execute the essence of Hainan sword style vividly and thoroughly. A

series of 'swish, swish, swish' was heard, followed by a miserable scream. Four chi long [1 chi is approx. 1 foot/30 cm] steel cane penetrated Situ Gang's left ribs, and came out from his right ribs. A stream of blood shot out like an arrow, painting the air around him red with his blood.

Beef Soup clapped her hands and said with a laugh, "Good sword technique."

Mu Yiban laughed and said, "This is just the simplest three moves of the 'Thirteen-Style Destroying the Heaven', can't be considered any good sword technique."

He copied Beef Soup's tone a while ago, deliberately speaking it lightly, but Lu Xiaofeng was shocked again.

The 'Thirteen-Style Destroying the Heaven' was originally Hainan Pai mountainous region's sword technique, unfortunately it disappeared thirty years ago that even the current Sect Leader only mastered two styles. Yet this half a person conveniently executed three moves and Situ Gang met a violent death under his swordplay.

Where did this half-person come from? Based on his martial art skill and sword technique, how come he was willing to be a slave, to be that Ninth Young Master's attendant?

Obviously the tall and slim, heroic-looking, black-clothed man also recognized the sword technique; he started at him in shock, his eyes were brimming with fear.

Mu Yiban laughed and said, "With your 'Swallow Flying across the Clouds' and your move 'Flying Swallow Coming Over' Fort Master Luo ran amuck all over the world, killing countless people; I was very looking forward to meeting you. But I wonder if Fort Master Luo would also have any regard of me, a half person?"

This man in black was unexpectedly the stronghold master of the first stronghold of the Twelve-Dock Alliance [see Chapter 1], the Black Swallow Luo Fei. This man made his name by his qinggong [lightness skill]; his move 'Flying Swallow Coming Over' was indeed a killer move that was rarely seen in the Wulin world.

His eyes were looking at Mu Yiban, but his feet were stepping backward. Suddenly he turned around and flew; he pounced toward a drunk who was lying under the railings of the nine-bend winding bridge. This move was exactly his consummate skill, the 'Flying Swallow Coming Over'; his stance was ingenious, his posture was graceful. Even if this strike missed, he would still be able to escape.

The person under the railings was as drunk as mud, the amethyst and gold court hat on his head nearly fell off, his drool flowed down from the corner of his mouth; he looked exactly like a dead man. Obviously dealing with a dead man was a lot better than dealing with a half man. Apparently Luo Fei had already had his eyes on him early on.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed inwardly. No matter what, just now this gentleman, Minister He [He Shangshu, see Chapter 4] had given him a cup of wine. If right now without any rhyme or reason he died while still dreaming in his drunkenness, Lu Xiaofeng could not bear to watch.

He heard a miserable cry, followed by a 'splosh!' water splashed

everywhere; someone had fallen into the pond, and disappeared under water. After a long time, a thin stream of blood appeared amidst the lotus leaves, followed by a face appeared like a petal of flower among the lotus leaves. It was none other than Luo Fei.

Minister He turned around and went back to sleep, finally the amethyst and gold court hat on his head fell off.

Mu Yiban immediately walked over and respectfully put the hat back on his head while saying, "Drunken Lying-down Flowing Cloud Seven-Killer Hand, authentic handed-down techniques of drinkers. Minister He has a very good martial art."

Beef Soup laughed and said, "Mu Yiban has a very good pair of eyes; you can even recognize the Drunken Seven-Killer Hand, which has been extinct for eighty years."

Honest Monk sighed and said, "Just one killer hand is enough to take people's life, why must use seven-killer hands?"

"Monk wants to try it?" Beef Soup asked.

"Monk is still clear-headed, why would I want to mess with drunkards?" Honest Monk replied.

"So who are you going to look for?" Beef Soup asked.

"Do you want to look for me?" Mu Yiban asked.

Honest Monk said, "Monk is at least a whole person, I must not fight half a person."

"I am a whole person," Beef Soup said.

Honest Monk said, "Monk is at least a man, I must not fight a woman."

"My Dad is a man," Beef Soup said.

Honest Monk said, "Monk is still young and vigorous, I must not fight an old man."

On that side, the people were still absorbed in throwing the dice; on this side two people already died, they did not even cast a single glance. It was as if this kind of matter was a common occurrence to them. It appeared that in their eyes, other people's lives were not as important as dice.

Beef Soup said, "What do you think of those people?"

Honest Monk said, "To Monk, this world is an illusion [orig. 'four elements are vanity'], I am scared of gambling demons."

Beef Soup laughed and said, "You pick left choose right, yet selected no one. Why don't I select one for you?"

"Who?" Honest Monk asked.

Beef Soup carelessly pointed ahead, "What do you think of him?"

Her slim, lily-white hand was pointing at Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart jumped. Honest Monk turned his head around to look at him; he laughed and said, "Monk tells you the truth, if Monk wants to live, it seems like I must pick him."

Beef Soup laughed aloud. "Monk's eyesight is not bad [orig. 'not lacking']," she said.

Lu Xiaofeng immediately shook his head; he said in loud voice, "Lacking, lacking. He lacks by 108,000 li." [1 li is approx. 0.5 km or 1/3 of a mile]

"Where does he lack?" Beef Soup asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Monk and I are friends, he would never want to take my life, and I don't want to take his life."

Honest Monk said, "Monk actually does not wish to take your life, it's just that now ..."

He sighed, and then continued, "Even if other people's life is important, it can never be more important than my own life. Even if Monk's life is of little value, good or bad it is Monk's own life."

It was indeed an honest statement. Honest Monk always made honest statements.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Since to Monk this world is an illusion, if you still want to take a friend's life, won't it mean you are gravely mistaken, you are desperately lacking?"

Honest Monk said, "A live dog is better off than a dead lion, a live dog can bite the dead lion; when it's a life-and-death situation, lacking a little bit is not a big deal."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "Why didn't you go look for someone else, but you looked for me instead?"

"Because you are lacking," Honest Monk said.

"Where do I lack?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk said, "Well, you don't know 'Thirteen-Style Destroying the Heaven', and you don't know 'Adaptable Orchid Hand', won't it mean you are desperately lacking?"

"But I don't want to take your life at all," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Honest Monk said, "You don't want to take Monk's life, but Monk wants to take your life, that means you are seriously lacking; you deserve to die."

Beef Soup coldly said, "This kind of people, one died means we have

one less of them; you still haven't made your move?"

Honest Monk said, "Miss is right. Monk is going to make his move."

Unexpectedly he did make his move as soon as he said he was going to make his move. Rolling the big, raggedy sleeve of his kasaya, he shot the roll forward, a strong gust of wind assailed Lu Xiaofeng's face.

Turns out he was still scared of Lu Xiaofeng's two fingers; he was afraid that any part of his body would be pinched. Even if he did not die, the pinch would be unbearable. But if the sleeve of his kasaya were pinched, then it would not matter. Much less he concentrated his internal power on the tip of his sleeve that it was as sharp as a blade. The number of people in Jianghu who were able to pinch this sleeve of his was indeed not many.

All along the little old man was watching with folded arms; suddenly he said, "Lu Xiaofeng, are you going to die in this monk's place, or are you going to preserve your own life? You have to think about it carefully."

Actually, Lu Xiaofeng has been thinking about this exact same question countless times in his mind; although he could not bear to see Honest Monk die in here, but he did not wish for Honest Monk to see him die in here either.

The little old man had just finished speaking, suddenly there was a 'rip', Honest Monk's sleeve was torn, exposing an arm that was even whiter than women's arm. Evidently the arm had not seen the sun for many years.

Human shadows flashing here and there, as if there were countless butterfly fluttering about. In the blink of an eye Honest Monk's raggedy kasaya was torn to shreds.

Lu Xiaofeng loudly said, "If Monk does not stop, I am afraid little monk will soon show itself."

It was really a vulgar language, but if he wanted Honest Monk to stop, Lu Xiaofeng had to say something that Honest Monk would find it difficult to bear.

Who would have thought that Honest Monk did not give a damn; his mouth muttered, "Little monk shows itself is always better than the big monk being stiff dead."

He had not even finished speaking, his feet suddenly tripped on Situ Gang's body, he almost stumbled.

This was exactly a very good opportunity for Lu Xiaofeng, but Lu Xiaofeng was still considering whether he should seize the chance to make his move.

Honest Monk, however, did not need to consider; taking the opportunity while he was tripping, suddenly he grabbed Lu Xiaofeng's waist and brought him down to the ground, rolled over, and pinned Lu Xiaofeng's body down.

Beef Soup clapped her hands and said with a laugh, "I didn't know Monk knew Mongolian wrestling."

"This is not Mongolian wrestling," Honest Monk replied, "This is Fusang Islands' Judo. Other than the Monk, really not many people knew this technique. Perhaps Lu Xiaofeng himself has never seen it, and that's why Monk was able to control him."

It was also an honest statement, Lu Xiaofeng was really under his control that he was unable to move at all. But the little old man said, "This is not an honest word."

"Honest Monk had never said any dishonest words."

The little old man said, "Even if he had never seen this kind of technique, you would not have been able to control him; if not for the fact that he could not bear to kill you, I am afraid right now Honest Monk could not even speak honest words."

Honest Monk thought for a while, and then said, "Even if he was really yielding to the Monk, Monk can always pretend not to know."

The little old man sighed and said, "That's an honest statement."

Lu Xiaofeng was lying face down on the ground, with Honest Monk's knee on the small of his back, his arm was also twisted behind his back; thinking about he had just missed a golden opportunity, and now he had to listen to this kind of honest words, he almost died of anger.

He was so angry that now he did not even know how to die.

On that side the gambling was finally over. He seemed to hear someone asking, "I lost seventy thousand taels; how about you?"

"I am a lot worse than you are."

Since there were people who lost that much, naturally there were also people who returned from a rewarding journey. Too bad he was not one of those people.

Not only his own self had been lost early on, now he seemed to have lost even his own life!

[1] Kasaya, a patchwork outer vestment worn by Buddhist monks.

[2] I don't know how to translate this, but I believe it is better stay untranslated. Amituofo – calling the name of Buddha. Shanzai – peace, good, excellent.

[3] A bit of explanation here: the word 'Princess' [公主] is usually reserved for princess of royal blood.

Chapter 6 – Wooden Men Formation

Those several people walked over to this side, only one person's footsteps sounded heavier than the rest, presumably he was loaded with the gold, pearl and jewels, and banknotes.

Lu Xiaofeng was dying to see who this person was, but he could not even lift his head; he only heard Beef Soup said, "They are coming only to see Ninth Brother's new attendant, his name is Mu Yiban, he seems to be a disciple of Hainan's Lone Wild Goose. Ninth brother sent him here especially to deliver quite a lot of gifts for me."

Her voice was brimming with delight. Immediately someone asked, "Where have Ol' Ninth been these days? When is he coming back? Has he been well recently? Did he get drunk?"

Immediately Mu Yiban answered all those questions respectfully, one by one; but as for this Ninth Master's whereabouts, even he himself was unclear.

Hearing that the Ninth Master's return was uncertain, everyone seemed to be very disappointed; hearing that he was well, everyone seemed to be very happy.

Toward this wanderer, who was far away at the end of the world, whose whereabouts was unclear, everyone seemed to show unspeakable concern; but toward the man who had just gambled with them, who right now was lying on the ground in front of them, nobody even cared to ask. Whether Lu Xiaofeng was alive or dead, they did not care at all.

Even Sha Man did not cast him a single glance. Beef Soup was asking her, "What did Ninth Brother get you this time?"

Sha Man replied indifferently, "He knew that I have never had any interest in these mere worldly possessions, why bother?"

"You don't have any interest in his worldly possessions?" Beef Soup asked, "You only have interest in him, don't you?"

Unexpectedly Sha Man did not deny.

With a cold laugh Beef Soup said, "Too bad he will never give himself to you."

The exchange between these two women seemed to be thick with vinegar [i.e. jealousy]. The more Lu Xiaofeng listened to them, the worse he felt. All along he was always the darling of the Jianghu, those who knew him were very proud of themselves, wherever he went, he was always well-received. The Master of Crouching Cloud Building's collection of aged famous wine, only he could get access to it. Even reclusive and haughty Kugua Dashi [Great Master (usually Buddhist) Bitter Melon], when he knew of his arrival, would personally go to the kitchen to cook some vegetarian dishes just for him. When girls saw him, they were simply unable to resist; even iceberg would melt.

But here, he seemed to suddenly turn into a worthless person, a nobody who was not even worthy to wipe that Ninth Master's shoes.

When one lived to such an extent, he might as well die; but Honest Monk definitely was not going to make his move.

It also seemed like Beef Soup was unwilling to continue talking to Sha Man; she turned around and glowered at Honest Monk. "You haven't made your move?" she said.

"Make what move?" Honest Monk asked.

Beef Soup said, "Make you move to kill."

"You all really want to kill him?" Honest Monk asked.

"Of course we do," Beef Soup replied.

"Alright," Honest Monk said, "Just find any person to kill him. As long as Monk won by one move or half a stance, it's enough; Monk won't kill people."

He clapped his hands, stood up, and left. In the blink of an eye he crossed the nine-bend winding bridge; unexpectedly, no one stopped him. It seems that although the people in this place were secretive, they were warriors who kept their words.

With a cold laugh Beef Soup said, "Finding someone who'd kill is not easy. Whoever willing to kill him, I'll give you ten thousand taels."

Lu Xiaofeng was lying on the ground, he did not seem to have any

inclination of standing up. Killing this kind of man did not seem to be difficult at all, yet Beef Soup offered ten thousand taels, not because her money came too easily to her, but because to have someone killed in this place one must pay that price.

Someone casually offered ten thousand taels to kill him, Lu Xiaofeng originally thought that there would be a lot of people who would scramble to do it.

Who would have thought that nobody even showed any reaction?

Sha Man coldly said, "You want to kill people, why don't you do it yourself? Could it be that you have never killed anybody?"

Beef Soup ignored her; staring at the Kunlun slaves who brought the chests over, she said, "You worked hard for several days carrying these chests around, at most you only earned about a hundred or so; killing someone you'll earn ten thousand taels. This kind of good business, you don't want to do it?"

Each and every one of the Kunlun slaves was just standing silently like wooden statue; turned out they did not even understand what she was speaking about.

Beef Soup said, "Mu Yiban, how about you?"

Mu Yiban sighed and said, "Actually, I wanted to earn this ten-thousand taels, it's just a pity that Ninth Master instructed me that every day I can only kill one person at most. I do not dare to disobey Ninth Master's

order.”

Clearly Beef Soup did not dare to disobey Ninth Master’s order either. She said coldly, “I know all of you don’t like it that my offer is too little. Alright, fifty thousand taels, paid in advance.”

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly sprang up. “I’ll do it,” he said.

“You’ll do what?” Beef Soup asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, “Anybody who’d kill me, you agree to pay him fifty thousand taels, right?”

“That’s right,” Beef Soup replied.

“I want to earn this fifty thousand taels,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“You want to kill yourself?” Beef Soup asked.

“Killing oneself is not a difficult matter,” Lu Xiaofeng said, “But fifty thousand taels is not a small amount.”

“After you die, what do you want the money for?” Beef Soup asked.

“To settle the debt,” Lu Xiaofeng replied.

He sighed and said, “Right now I owe too much debt, if I don’t pay in

full, even becoming ghost I won't be at ease."

Beef Soup looked at him with cold eyes; suddenly she said coldly, "Very well, I'll let you have the fifty thousand taels."

From her bosom she casually took out a stack of banknotes, the smallest denomination was at least five thousand taels.

Lu Xiaofeng picked several sheets, the total was exactly fifty thousand taels. He gave the little old man one and said, "Here's fifteen thousand taels; ten thousand to pay your money back, five thousand is the interest."

The little old man beamed from ear to ear, "The interest is indeed not small," he said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "That's why you ought to give me loans a bit more often. I am the kind of guy who is always generous."

The little old man sighed and said, "You are indeed generous, extremely generous."

Lu Xiaofeng turned to Sha Man and said, "Here is five thousand and five hundred taels; five hundred taels to redeem the knife, five thousand taels is the interest!"

"Five-hundred-tael yields five-thousand-tael interest?" Sha Man asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Five hundred taels loss is no different than ten

thousand taels loss anyway, it's only natural that the interest is the same!"

Sha Man stared at him. There was a hint of smile in her cold and detached eyes. "Now I know why you are this poor," she said, "If that's the way you spend money, how could you not being poor?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "The money came easy anyway. Now I know that to make money, perhaps nothing in the world is easier than killing people."

Sha Man's face became cold again, cold and completely emotionless. Taking out his chamber pot knife, she said, "Are you going to kill yourself with this?"

Lu Xiaofeng immediately shook his head, "It won't do," he said, "This knife has a bit of smelly aura around it."

Looking at the banknotes in his hand, he muttered to himself, "After paying back twenty thousand five hundred taels, I still have twenty-nine thousand five hundred taels. Money has not been spent, won't I die in vain?"

"Then quickly spend it all," Beef Soup said.

Lu Xiaofeng thought for a moment, and then he went to the little old man and said, "Didn't you say that there's the best wine in the world in this place, but the price is very high?"

"I did," the little old man replied, "But I also said that today you are my

guest; all drinks are free."

With a cold laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "Your daughter paid people to kill me, you expect me to drink your wine? Come, take these nine thousand five hundred taels, I want the best wine. I want all the wine this money can buy."

The moustache suddenly laughed and said, "You just spent another nine thousand five hundred taels; seems like you still have twenty thousand taels left?"

"How much did you lose just now?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The moustache said, "I am the big winner."

"How about we have another round?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "You might as well eat 'em all and be delighted."

The moustache laughed aloud and said, "Alright, I like a delightful man like you."

Beef Soup coldly said, "Not only he is delightful, very soon he will be painful[1]. Whether he swipe his neck or cut his head, it will be very painful."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "I know a kind of death that is not painful at all."

"What kind of death?" Beef Soup asked.

"Death by losing [in gambling]," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

The dice were back in the bowl, the wine has also been delivered. Ten full jars of wine, there was Nu'erhong [blushing young maiden], there was also Zhuyeqing [green bamboo leaf].

Nine thousand five hundred taels for ten jars of wine, the price was rather too expensive, but Lu Xiaofeng did not care. He opened a jar of Green Bamboo Leaf and poured almost half a jar into his mouth. "Good wine," he loudly exclaimed.

The moustache laughed and said, "You drink like cattle, but still able to tell whether the wine is good or bad; that is indeed not easy."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Actually, I can't necessarily tell, it's just that expensive wine is always good. And good wine, no matter how much you drink, the next day your head won't be aching."

Beef Soup coldly said, "If the head is already fallen, you won't care whether it is aching or not."

Lu Xiaofeng ignored her. Picking up the dice, he tapped the edge of the bowl and said, "How much do you want to bet?"

"How about ten thousand taels?" the moustache said.

"Ten thousand is too little," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "It would be best if we bet twenty thousand. With one throw we decide the winner and loser."

"Alright, that will be delightful," the moustache said.

He had not even taken the banknote out, Lu Xiaofeng had already tossed the dice into the bowl. They rolled only twice and stopped immediately. All three dice showed six dots, the banker eat 'em all, there was not even a chance to catch up.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed aloud and said, "When someone is going to die soon, a change of fortune always comes."

The moustache still had the banknote in his hand, "But I haven't put down my bet," he cried out.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "That's alright, I trust you. Besides, I am going to die soon, I am sure you won't renege a debt to a dead person."

Although the moustache did not agree ten thousand times, his mouth did not utter a single word.

Lu Xiaofeng took his banknote and asked, "You still want to bet?"

The moustache replied, "Naturally I still want to bet, but this time let me be the banker."

"Alright," Lu Xiaofeng said, "We can always take turn in being the banker.

As long as you can throw three sixes, you can eat 'em all, no need to be polite."

He even put down the twenty thousand taels he had just won and said with a laugh, "You won't be able to throw three sixes anyway."

The moustache's eyes brightened. He grabbed the dice, but turned his head around to the white-haired old pedant, who had been standing by his side all along, "Do you think I can throw three sixes this time?"

The white-haired old man smiled and said, "I think you ought to be able to. If you could not, now that would be strange."

The moustache's spirit was trembling with excitement; with a loud shout the dice were thrown into the bowl. Very soon you can tell that there were six dots showing at the top. Who would have thought that one die suddenly jumped, flipped in the air, bounced several chi more, and then when it fell, it turned into a pile of dust.

The other two dice in the bowl had stopped; it was two sixes.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly asked Sha Man, "Two sixes, plus one dot, how many dots are there?"

Sha Man said, "Still one dot, because whatever the last die produces, that is the one that counts."

"The last die, what if it does not have any dots?" Lu Xiaofeng asked again.

"No dots means no dots," Sha Man answered.

"Which one is bigger, no dots or one dot?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Naturally one dot is bigger," Sha Man replied.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Since one dot is even bigger than no dot at all, and the banker does not have any dots, what's to be done?"

Sha Man said, "The banker pay 'em all."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed aloud and said, "Thirty years reversal of wheel of fortune; I couldn't believe this time you threw a no-dot."

The moustache did not utter a single word, immediately he paid Lu Xiaofeng's forty thousand taels. He pushed the bowl to Lu Xiaofeng and said, "This time it's your turn to be the banker. I just hope you won't throw a no-dot."

Although his mouth was saying that, in his heart he said, "It would be strange if this time you did not throw a no-dot."

Naturally other people's thoughts were the same as his. Even if Lu Xiaofeng was using three metal dice, if they wanted to pinch one, it would be as easy as pinching an ant.

Trickery and fraud in gambling was originally a sneaky thing, a

shameful matter; however, now it seemed to be a just and honorable matter.

The snow-white-haired old pedant scrambled forward to put down thirty-thousand-tael bet; he said, "Too bad the banker's capital is only eighty thousand."

The moustache said, "I am the loser here, he has to pay me in full first, and then you all can have your share."

He already took out all banknotes from his pocket. One person's bet was already more than eighty thousand taels. This time, only if he neither win nor lose other people would have any share. However, everybody seemed to believe that Lu Xiaofeng would definitely lose.

The old pedant sighed and said, "It seems that this time we can only drink the soup."

When the banker failed to compensate for his loss, the winner was said to be 'drinking the soup'. In the gamblers' eyes, apparently there is nothing more terrible than 'drinking the soup'.

He was just thinking to taking his thirty thousand taels back when suddenly someone said, "This time I'll help the banker. Just put down whatever you want to bet. Pay 'em all or eat 'em all."

Unexpectedly the speaker was the little old man. He had a stack of banknotes in his hand. 'Slap!' he tossed it in front of Lu Xiaofeng, saying, "Here I have one million three hundred and fifty taels. Just consider it my

loan to you. If it is not enough, just ask; you'll get whatever amount you want."

Lu Xiaofeng was both surprised and delighted at the same time. "Since when did you become so generous?" he asked.

The little old man laughed and said, "Not only you are a trustworthy debtor, the interest you pay is also high. If I don't lend money to you, whom should I lend it to?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "This time, if I lose, and then I die, where are you going to collect the debt?"

The little old man said, "No matter what kind of business you are doing, you must be willing to take some risk!"

Beef Soup said, "This time the risk is a bit too much. I am afraid you would lose your life savings."

The little old man said drily, "My money has long ago become moldy; even if I lose my life savings, it's not a big deal."

His gambling capital suddenly increased by one million three hundred and fifty taels, not only Lu Xiaofeng's spirit received a big boost, other people were also beaming with joy; it was as if they already had the banknotes in their money purse. Seven, eight hands were outstretched at once, gold, jewels and banknotes immediately filled the table, the total amount was at least a million taels.

On the side stood a carton box where dozens of brand new dice were stacked neatly inside.

Lu Xiaofeng grabbed three dice. He was about to throw, suddenly he shook his head and mumbled, "The dice in this place is a bit possessed; just like fleas, for no rhyme or reason they like to jump, even bigger dots cannot stop it from jumping. I have to think of a better idea."

Suddenly he picked up a golden cup from behind, and drank the wine inside the cup in one gulp. While his right hand threw the dice, his left hand immediately dropped the golden cup down. They heard the tinkling of the rolling dice underneath the golden cup. "I want to see if this time you can jump or not," he said.

The old pedant and the moustache 'you look at me, I look at you', neither one guarded against Lu Xiaofeng's move. When the golden cup was raised, the three dice had stopped. Sure enough, it was three sixes.

Lu Xiaofeng roared in laughter, "Three by six, eighteen dots. Eat 'em all!"

As soon as he finished speaking those eight words, he swept the gold, jewels and banknotes from the table.

The moustache sighed. He said with a bitter laugh, "This time you really eat 'em all, you even cleaned up all my capital and profit."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "As long as we can still gamble, you can't be considered losing. Come again."

The moustache sighed and said, "Today we don't have any gambling capital anymore, how can we gamble?"

He looked at Lu Xiaofeng with the corner of his eye, his sigh was also particularly heavy; although he did not say it, his meaning was very clear.

Such a generous person like Lu Xiaofeng, in this kind of situation, he ought to take his winning and lend everybody a little bit, so that they all could continue gambling.

Who would have thought that Lu Xiaofeng seemed to be completely oblivious? As soon as he finished sweeping everything from the table, he stood up and said with a laugh, "Today we can't gamble, there's still tomorrow. As long as I am not dead, you will always have the opportunity to recover your capital."

The moustache said, "And if you die?"

Lu Xiaofeng also sighed and said, "If I die, I am afraid all these banknotes will follow me into the coffin."

He took out one million four hundred taels and handed it over to the little old man. Counting the remainder, he still had more than nine hundred thousand taels.

The little old man was beaming from ear to ear. "In just a short while I made fifty thousand taels profit. We can do this kind of business again next time."

Lu Xiaofeng counted the rest of the banknotes again. Suddenly he asked, "If you have nine hundred thirty thousand taels, would you be willing to kill people for fifty thousand taels?"

The little old man replied, "It depends on whom you are going to kill."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "If you have to kill yourself?"

The little old man replied, "That kind of matter, no one would be willing to do."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Therefore, I also am not willing to do!"

He had already had a piece of banknote worth fifty thousand taels in his hand, which he handed to Beef Soup and said, "You'd better find somebody better qualified than me!"

Before he even finished speaking, his body had already at the head of the bridge; laughing heartily he said, "Whether you want my money, or you want my life, you can always find me any time; I cannot escape anyway."

By the time he finished speaking, he had already entered the cluster of flowers, and was out of sight.

Everybody watched him shaking his sleeve and leaving helplessly, surprisingly no one tried to stop him.

The setting sun filled the sky, all kinds of flowers showed their brilliance. Lu Xiaofeng was very happy. Today he finally returned from a rewarding journey after all.

Would other people still be able to find him later? Would he be able to escape? These were questions for later. Just like when eating flat bread there is a good chance of choking to death later, who would want to worry about this matter too much now?

He had observed the surrounding and made sure of the way out, but after going around the clusters of flowers seven, eight times, making about ten circles, he still could not find the path among the clusters of flowers from which he came. Looking up, he saw the twilight was turning deeper into the night, the setting sun has long ago disappeared behind the western hills, the valley turned into a piece of darkness; he could not even see the nine-bend winding bridge anymore.

He stopped, calmed his nerves, and tried to find his bearings. After walking for another hour, he was still among the clusters of flowers. Jumping on top of a cluster of flowers and looking around, he saw that outside this cluster of flowers there were still flowers. Other than flowers, he could see nothing else. Even the shadow of the flowers gradually was beginning to blur.

Surprisingly, not a single lantern light was seen in the valley, the moon and the stars did not give their light either. The flowers were fragrant, but after a while, the sweet fragrance even made his head a little dizzy. Were the people in this place never lighted any lantern at night?

If he forced his way through the clusters of flowers, wouldn't it be like a blind man riding a blind horse, without knowing when they would suddenly fall into a trap, and then their death would be for nothing.

Anybody could see that this place was not the kind of place where people could come and go as they please. When he wanted to go, others let him go, perhaps it was simply because other people had already known that he would not be able to leave.

The people in this place, other than that little old man, each and every one of them was Wulin experts with consummate martial art skills, yet they obviously had never exposed their faces in Jianghu. Even if they walked among the people of Jianghu, no one could see their martial art clearly.

Lu Xiaofeng had always had good eyesight, but when he met Beef Soup this time, his eyes failed to see.

That one-eyed old fisherman and the horse-faced man, there was a very good chance that they died under Beef Soup's hands!

After the horse-face died in the sea, when Lu Xiaofeng was taking a bath, didn't Beef Soup also take a bath at the same time?

The Old Fox's ship could set sail any minute, even if the passengers had spare time to slip out of the ship, they could not possibly spend that time to take a bath, otherwise she happened to just kill someone in the sea.

When the one-eyed old fisherman died, it was also Beef Soup who

happened to have the opportunity to kill him.

Although now Lu Xiaofeng finally was able to understand a lot of things, there were still many more things that he did not understand.

Why did she kill those two men? Why did those two men plot against Yue Yang? What was the relationship between Yue Yang and her? How did they know the Old Fox's ship was going to capsize?

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. He suddenly felt that the pickled radish in the firewood storeroom at the back of Wudang Mountain smelled a bit better than the flowers in this place.

In his heart he already started to have slight regret; perhaps he really should have heeded Yue Yang's warning not to get on board the Old Fox's ship, then perhaps by this time he was already on the Fusang Islands, embracing the tender and obedient girls, while drinking top quality sake.

He heard that the 'laurel crown' and 'great name', these two types of wine, were really not bad, just like the girls over there, whose mouths were pleasantly sweet, yet the strength of whose backs was more than enough.

Lu Xiaofeng could not help heaving a deep sigh. He was thinking of finding a nice place to sleep among the clusters of flowers before doing anything else when suddenly he saw a bright lantern ahead.

In the endless darkness suddenly there was a bright lantern light, it was indeed a lot warmer to his heart compared to the sixes on the dice. Like a

moth drawn to light Lu Xiaofeng immediately went toward the lantern light. Even if he would be burned to death by the lantern's flame, he did not care.

At least dying in the light was a lot better than forever living in the darkness.

The lantern light came from an ornately decorated window!

If there is a window, naturally there is also a house.

It was a 'three-brightness two-darkness' ornamented pavilion [not sure what it is, 三明两暗], with vermillion railings and winding corridor, the construction was extremely magnificent and exquisite.

There was a window at an oblique angle from where he stood, looking from a distance, he could see that there were nine people inside; one was sitting, the other eight were standing.

The sitting man had white face and small beard, wearing brocade gown and pearl-studded hat, he was looking at a scroll under the lantern light.

The eight standing men carried respectful and solemn bearing, they were standing quietly, obviously they were the sitting man's attendants.

These nine men were not among those in the water pavilion earlier. Looking at their attire and manner, apparently they were a lot more noble than those people. But Lu Xiaofeng was not able to figure out their background, hence it was only natural that he did not dare to rush in

recklessly.

There was a pond in the courtyard, the water was so clear that he could see the bottom. The lantern light shone outside, reflected by the rippling water. There seemed to be someone lying down motionless at the bottom of the pond.

Lu Xiaofeng could not help walking over to take a closer look. There was indeed someone under water, only the white of his eyes was visible, looking straight up.

Other than dead fish, no one would look at people like that!

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked, but relieved at the same time. This man was a dead man!

"Who is he? How did he die in here?"

Lu Xiaofeng thought for a moment, he suddenly felt something was amiss. A dead man would definitely float up, how could he stay sunk underwater?

Apparently the number of strange things in this place was indeed not small.

"I don't care whether he is dead or alive, he has nothing to do with me."

Lu Xiaofeng decided not to concern himself with this matter. While he

was about to leave, suddenly he heard a splash, something was flying over from a distance and fell into the pond. Unexpectedly it was a black cat.

As soon as the splash arose, the man at the bottom of the pond suddenly swam up like a fish. Unexpectedly there was a thin blade in his hand; without speaking without noise he paddled up the water. The blade flashed, it entered the black cat's underbelly.

Before the cat could even cry out 'Meow!' it already lost its life. The man dived back into the bottom of the pond, lying down motionless; he appeared to be like a dead man again!

Although killing the cat could not be considered too extraordinary, but this man's movement was indeed too fast. Not only that, the way he moved was too strange, too mysterious. Watching him, Lu Xiaofeng could not help but was shocked and shivered with cold sweats.

Once again the pair of dead-fish like eyes stared at him, as if considering him another black cat.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly turned around and charged into the room through the window.

No matter what, a man sitting under the lantern looking at a scroll must be a bit more agreeable than a man lying in wait to kill a cat at the bottom of the pond.

The lantern was not too bright, this man was still sitting on the same

place with the same concentration looking at the same scroll!

Actually, Lu Xiaofeng had been wanting to see what kind of painting was on that scroll; something that could make a man focused his attention on it for so long must be worth seeing.

He had already aimed for a position; as soon as he entered through the window, he would made somersault in the air, and landed exactly in front of the table opposite to the man.

He had also prepared some pleasant words of politeness to start a conversation, hoping to make this man happy, so that not only the man would not drive him away, he might also take out some good wine to entertain him.

Who would have known that he did not have any chance to speak even one word? He did not even have a chance to open his mouth, because in the split second when his body landed, the eight standing man immediately pounced on him together.

Eight men. Although their movement was not particularly swift, but the coordination among them was like seamless net of heavens, not one drop of water can leak out.

These eight men used their fists, their legs, their palms, their arms, from four sides eight directions attacked together. In the blink of an eye Lu Xiaofeng was surrounded in the middle. Eight attacks with eight different moves, each move was a killer strike.

Lu Xiaofeng dodged six strikes, then a fist and a palm; he was thinking to explain, to ask them to stop, but as he was parrying someone's palm strike, he discovered that any explanation would be completely useless, because these eight men would definitely not hear anything he said!

To his astonishment, these eight men were wooden men.

There were many kinds of wooden men, some wooden men were even more frightening than real men. Although Lu Xiaofeng had never fought at the Shaolin Temple's Wooden Men Alley, he had seen the wounded and crippled Shaolin disciples that have been through the Wooden Men Alley; many of those disciples' martial art skill were not bad at all.

He had been wondering all along, how could real people be injured under the wooden men's hands? If not for Reverend Iron Shoulder [see Chapter 1] urged him over and over not to do it, he would have gone to Shaolin Temple to have firsthand experience of how formidable those wooden men were.

Now he finally experienced it.

These eight men, no doubt they were designed based on the Wooden Men Alley principle, which was more complicated, as well as more powerful, than the wooden ox and wooden horse used by Zhuge (Liang) during the military expedition against the barbarians. Not only these wooden men had copper arms and iron bones, their moves and strength were profound. Furthermore, once the mechanism was activated, unexpectedly they unleashed Shaolin's divine fist according to the Luohan Formation principle.

The Luohan Formation was actually Shaolin's consummate skill. In the past Devil Cult's Xueshen Zi went up Mount Song alone, consecutively defeated seven Shaolin's senior monks, but he was trapped in the middle of the Luohan Formation. He fought fiercely for three days and nights but failed to make any breakthrough, in the end his body was weary, his strength gone, and so he died of exhaustion.

Since then, Luohan Formation's fighting prowess was well-known throughout the world, and no Jianghu people dared to carelessly oppose Shaolin.

When the same formation principle was applied to the wooden men, its power was even greater, because wooden men cannot be struck dead; even if you break one of its arms, or twist one of its legs, it won't fall down, and the formation won't be adversely affected either.

But if its punch landed on you, you would definitely be unable to bear it; therefore, it was able to launch attack completely without any apprehension. You will find it difficult to dodge, and you can't fight brute force against brute force either. If you want to break out of their encirclement, it would be as difficult as ascending the heavens.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly realized that he could only take a beating until he was dead.

You hit it, it won't feel any pain, but if it hits you, you will feel unbearable pain. You cannot strike it dead, but it can strike you dead.

This kind of fighting was indeed not a good business deal, just like a bandit filing a lawsuit against the victim; you can only lose and cannot

win at all.

Besides, even if he won, it could not be considered a spectacular victory. Even if he managed to break the eight wooden men to pieces, chop and turn them into firewood, it did not mean anything. This kind of stupid business, Lu Xiaofeng had never wanted to do; too bad that right now, even if he did not want to fight, he still had to fight.

The wooden men's punches created whooshing gust of wind, the flame of the lantern on the table was flickering erratically, it could go out at any time. Fighting desperately with the wooden men in the dark was an even more stupid thing.

The brocade-gowned, white-faced scholar with pearl-inlaid hat did not stop rolling his eyes, as if he could not help laughing at this situation.

This man was also a wooden man. But how could a wooden man's eyes rolled around? Moreover, it seemed to follow its eight attendants' punches and kicks. Could it be that it also understood Shaolin's fighting technique?

Lu Xiaofeng was stunned; he was lost in thought, without realizing it, his eyes were also rolling around, following the wooden man's eyes. Suddenly, 'bang!' his head received a punch; even his brains were nearly knocked out.

Although his brains were not knocked out, he suddenly had a brainwave.

When the fist landed on his head, the wooden scholar's eyes unexpectedly stopped; when the fist started to move again, its eyes also followed.

Between the eight wooden men's fists and eyes there seemed to be an invisible string.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly made his move, using his two fingers he pinched and broke two sections of wooden fingers. 'Zip!' the two sections of wooden fingers shot out from his fingers, 'pop, pop!' they hit the wooden scholar's pair of eyes.

Naturally wooden men cannot cry out in pain, it was still sitting there nicely, it did not even make the slightest move, but all eight wooden men suddenly fell down.

Lu Xiaofeng flew out the window. Eight wooden men came crashing down, but he did not even turn his head to look back.

He did not have any wish to see his own glorious victory. Even if he knocked down eight thousand or eighty thousand wooden men, there was not the least bit of glory in it. As long as he was able to escape unscathed from this room, he felt he was extremely lucky already.

In the battle this time, he was lucky not to lose anything, although he ended up with several other things:

Several bruises on his shoulders and back, and several bumps on his head.

Other than that, this matter had given him a very good lesson:

In the split second when he was flying out of the window, he swore to himself several hundred times: when he had no choice but to fight in the future, he would at least see first what kind of person he was dealing with. If it was a living person, he would at least shout his greeting; but if it was a wooden man, he would immediately run far away into a desolate place.

While he was still thinking about this first lesson, the second lesson has arrived.

He suddenly discovered that his feet were at the lotus pond.

While it's true that being beaten by wooden men till he got bloody nose and swollen face was unpleasant, but being stabbed in the chest by a man like he was stabbing a cat, wouldn't it mean that he died in vain?

He had not looked down yet, but he sense that those dead fish-like eyes were staring at him.

And then there was that thinner-than-paper fast blade.

When one was already falling down, it did not matter whether it was his body that was falling down, or it was his spirit that was falling down, it would be very difficult to pull himself up.

Right now he was already out of breath, by the time he took a breath, he would have been fallen into the pond.

In the split second when he was taking a breath, the blade would have pierced his lung.

By the time the blade was pulled out, he would have been floating up like the dead cat, or like the one-eyed old fisherman or the horse-faced man. There would have not been any bloodstain on his entire body, other people would have thought that he was drunk and fell into the pond and drowned to his death.

Although this kind of death was quick, as well as painless, his death would still be very much in vain.

Who would have thought that before he fell into the water, someone had already come out of the water? Cold light flashed in his hand, it was a short blade; a short blade that was as thin as paper.

Not only was this person able to move fast and vicious, he was able to lay down motionless under water with eyes open as he stared at people. His water skill was, no doubt, very good.

If it were on dry ground, Lu Xiaofeng might still be able to deal with his blade; but under water, Lu Xiaofeng was completely helpless.

Unfortunately, he moved a bit too fast this time.

Although Lu Xiaofeng had no way of leaping up, but if he wanted to

sink a bit quicker, to sink a bit deeper, it was not too hard to do. With a loud 'splash!' he fell into the pond, and sank straight to the bottom. With the 'flipping carp' move, he wrapped his arms around the man's legs as hard as he could.

To his surprise, the man did not struggle at all, the blade did not turn around and stab down.

Although under water Lu Xiaofeng's movement slowed down a bit, but it could not be considered too slow. In this split second, he had already pinched the vital acupoints on this man's legs, and dragged him back into the water.

Light from above faintly penetrated the surface of the water, this man's distorted face twitched, his eyes bulged out, unexpectedly he had been strangled to death by someone else.

A moment ago Lu Xiaofeng thought that he was dead, but he was actually alive. Now Lu Xiaofeng thought that he was alive, but he was actually dead.

He spent this much effort, unexpectedly the one he was dealing with was a dead man. This really made him not know whether he should laugh or cry.

Luckily there was no other people in the pond to witness this. He quickly released the man's legs and splashed his head out of the water. Immediately he heard someone clapping and laughing heartily. "Good skill; even a dead man is drowned by you. My utmost admiration."

Someone was sitting by the pond, his head shiny, his feet bare; unexpectedly he was the Honest Monk.

There were still drops of water on his bald head, his tattered monk's clothes were still dripping wet; obviously he was just out of the water as well.

Lu Xiaofeng glowered at him. "Turns out Monk can also kill," he said.

Honest Monk laughed and said, "Monk does not kill, it's just that he mistook him for a fish, therefore, he killed him by mistake."

"And it was also an honest statement?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk sighed and said, "Looks like it was not."

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed. He jumped out of the pond and sat down next to him. "Why hasn't Monk left yet?" he asked.

"Why haven't you left?" Honest Monk asked.

"I cannot find my way out," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Honest Monk sighed and said, "If even you cannot find your way out, what hope does Monk have?"

"Why did Monk come here?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk said, "If Monk does not enter hell, who would enter hell?"

"So you knew this place is hell?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "What are you doing in hell? What kind of man is that Ninth Master? How could he put you inside the chest?"

Honest Monk did not say anything.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "Since you knew, why didn't you say anything?"

Honest Monk shook his head. "Mysteries of heaven must not be revealed," he mumbled, "Buddha said: must not speak, must not speak."

Lu Xiaofeng was anxious. He suddenly sprang up, reached out, and pinched Honest Monk's nose. "You really won't speak?" he asked.

Because his nose was pinched, Honest Monk was unable to shake his head, he was unable to speak either; he could only pointing toward his own nose and breathed deeply.

With a cold laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "You are greedy for life, afraid of death; you sell you your friend; you have done things that indicated that you don't need your nose. I might as well pinch your nose off and be done with it."

Although his mouth was speaking harshly, his hand was getting a bit lighter. Finally Honest Monk was able to gasp; with a bitter laugh he said,

"Although Monk is afraid of death, selling out friends is something that I do not dare to do."

"Why did you want me to die in your place?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because I knew you will definitely not die," Honest Monk replied.

"Why is that?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk answered, "I could clearly see that the Big Boss has a mind to take you as his son-in-law."

"Who's the Big Boss?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk said, "Look over there; if that is not the Big Boss, then who is he?"

He casually pointed forward. Lu Xiaofeng could not help following his finger; but like an arrow his body suddenly shot backward. He made a somersault in the air and ran into the darkness.

Honest Monk's qinggong could be reckoned to be the first or second best in Jianghu. But Lu Xiaofeng was not someone who was easy to deal with. With a twist of his waist he flew to give a chase.

Although the night was very dark, and although he was one step late, he was still able to vaguely see Honest Monk's shadow flying ahead of him.

Actually, he did not really want to pinch Honest Monk's nose off, it's just that in a strange place like this, he would feel a bit more comfortable if he could grab an acquaintance and keep him by his side; just like a man falling into the water, if he saw a piece of wooden board, he would definitely hold on to it tightly.

Although Honest Monk was flying very fast, Lu Xiaofeng speed in chasing him was not slow either. Very soon the distance between the two people was getting closer and closer.

Unexpectedly there was another lantern light ahead.

The light was coming from a big and tall building, with high ridge and flying eaves; it looked like a temple or Daoist monastery, but it also looked like a very big yamen [feudal government office] building.

Naturally there was no yamen in this place. Like a flying swallow seeking refuge in the woods Honest Monk suddenly dived into the temple.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed in his heart, "This time it's really 'the monk can run away, but the temple won't run with him [i.e. I'll get you sooner or later]."

He threw all cautions to the wind [orig. 'did not care if three by seven is twenty-one'] and pursued in. The courtyard was cold and deserted, but the main hall was bright with lantern light. A big, imposing high-ranking official in all his regalia was sitting behind a big, imposing official table. On either side of him several banner guardians solemnly stood in a row, tall and majestic, with hands hanging down on their sides. And then

there were also several feudal yamen bailiffs, wearing red tassell in their hats, carrying demon-head saber on their waists.

Surprisingly, this place was not a temple; it was a yamen. But how could there be a high-ranking government official stationed in this kind of place? This yamen must be fake; these people were, of course, wooden men.

At the sight of wooden men, Lu Xiaofeng already had big headache; it didn't matter whether Honest Monk was really hiding inside or not, he simply wanted to sneak out.

Who would have thought that the high-ranking official behind the magistrate table suddenly slammed down his gavel[2] and said in a loud voice, "Lu Xiaofeng, since you are already here, where do you think you are going?"

Immediately the guards and bailiffs on his either side also shouted together, "Where do you think you are going?"

Turned out not a single one of these men was a wooden man. Lu Xiaofeng felt relieved instead. In his view, living men were not as scary as wooden men. Unexpectedly he really decided to stay; he strode in while looking around carefully. The high-ranking official behind the table's attire was Tang era's one-pin rank imperial court dress, his head wore purple and golden hat; unexpectedly he was Minister He who was very fond of the wine cups. It's just that at this moment there was no wine cup in his hand, but a block of gavel.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "Turns out it is Four Brightness Mad

Guest Mr. He [see chapter 4]; are you thinking of inviting me for a drink?"

Although Minister He's eyes were still glazing with drunkenness, his expression was very serious. With a wooden face he said, "You have arrived at the Hall of the Ministry of Justice; yet you still dare to be this brazen?"

"This the Hall of the Ministry of Justice?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Correct," Minister He replied.

Lu Xiaofeng said with a laugh, "Not only you are wrong, you are gravely mistaken."

"What's wrong?" Minister He asked.

"He Zhizang was the Director of Board of Rites, how could he sit in the Hall of the Ministry of Justice?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Actually, about He Zhizang's past achievement, he was not too clear either; he was just bluffing. Who would have thought that he had actually succeeded by a lucky stroke?

The fact was: during He Zhizang's lifetime, the highest official position he ever achieved was the Assistant Minister of the Ministry of Rites, while simultaneously held the title of Jixian Institution Scholar. Afterwards, from his office in the Ministry of Transport & Irrigation, when Su Zong was still the Crown Prince, he was transferred to be a guest instructor to the secretarial supervisors. When he was old, he became a Daoist priest at

the Thousand-Autumn Monastery. Even the title of Director of the Board of Rites was bestowed to him posthumously.

However, the fact that he had never been in the Ministry of Justice was actually a hundred percent true.

Sure enough, the fake Minister He's countenance turned awkward. Unexpectedly, from shame he became angry. Slamming the gavel forcefully on the table, he shouted, "I, Minister He, insist on sitting in the Hall of the Ministry of Justice; so what?"

"Nothing," Lu Xiaofeng said with a wry smile, "You are free to sit wherever you want to sit; it doesn't have anything to do with me."

"Of course it does!" Minister He said.

"So? What is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Minister He said, "I came here precisely to interrogate you!"

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled. "I did not commit any crime, what are you going to interrogate? What do you want to ask?" he said.

Minister He slammed the gavel again. "Now that you are here, you still don't admit your guilt?" he said sternly.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "The only mistake that I know of is that I came to the

wrong place, and that I made a wrong friend."

Minister He angrily said, "You obtained someone's money, yet went back on your words, you cheated in gambling, swindled the money and ran away. Are you telling me you don't know your own crimes?"

Lu Xiaofeng thought for a moment, and then said, "Obtaining someone's money, yet went back on my words. That sounds familiar."

"Of course," Minister He said, "You received other people's fifty thousand taels, you ought to honor your promise. This is irrefutable evidence; you can't deny it even if you want to."

"I don't want to deny it," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "But isn't the crime of inciting people to commit murder is greater than mine? Why didn't you arrest her first and have her interrogated in here?"

Minister He said, "I want to interrogate you first, what can you do about it?"

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "When a drunkard sits in the criminal court, naturally I am being robbed of my case; I can only lose with no chance of winning."

Minister He said, "You went back on your words, that was your first crime. You cheated in public gambling, that was your second crime. You held contempt toward the court of law, that is your third crime. Now that the three crimes have been stated, do you want to take the flogging, or do you want to accept punishment?"

"What if I take the flogging?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"If you take the flogging," Minister He replied, "Then I'll have people flog you to your death."

"And what if I accept punishment?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Minister He said, "Then I'll sentence you to 30 years of hard labor. Whatever I tell you to do, you have to do it!"

"What if I neither want to take the flogging nor accept punishment?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Minister He was taken aback; apparently he did not expect Lu Xiaofeng would ask such question.

Lu Xiaofeng helped him making the decision, "In that case, I'd better anoint oil to my feet and slip out of here at once."

Self-established court of law, self-appointed minister; it was actually a ridiculous thing. But Lu Xiaofeng knew that no matter how ridiculous things in this place may appear to be, they could turn into very serious matters. If you think that they were joking when they told you that they were going to sentence you to 30 years of hard labor, then you are wrong.

But he could also see that dealing with living people was not necessarily easier than dealing with wooden men. Although this Four

Brightness Mad Guest was acting like a fool, no doubt he was also a martial art expert with some hidden consummate skill.

The only way to deal with him was to get away as fast as possible, as far as possible.

Lu Xiaofeng's qinggong, even Sikong Zhaixing may not necessarily beat him. In this regard, he always had a very high confidence in himself.

In just a few backward leaps, he was already out of the Court Hall. Twenty or thirty zhang [1 zhang is approx. 10 ft/3 m] later, just as he was thinking of taking a breather, he heard someone behind him talking coldly, "Your qinggong is really not bad, it's a pity that even if you really can sprout wings, you won't be able to escape." He could hear clearly, it was indeed Minister He's voice.

Unexpectedly Minister He was able to follow him just like his shadow; the distance between them was less than a zhang. This deranged Four Brightness Mad Guest's qinggong was a lot higher than he thought.

He performed every trick he knew, but no matter where he went, Minister He was still following him like a shadow.

Ahead the rippling water looked like a mirror. Suddenly he discovered that he had come back to the pond he left a while ago. The corpse in the water had disappeared; did the man really die and then came back to life? Or all along he did not die?

The people in this place, whether alive or dead, whether real or

dummies, were actually not too easy to tell.

Minister He suddenly said, "Even if you jump into the pond, I will still catch up with you. Even if you enter the Palace of the Dragon King, you won't be able to escape."

Lu Xiaofeng originally did not have any intention of jumping into the pond; there might be another man with fish-like eyes and a thin blade in his hand, waiting for him at the bottom of the pond. But as soon as he heard Minister He said so, he jumped down instead. Like an osprey diving into the water, he dived to the bottom of the pool, and waited there for a long time. Sure enough, there was not the least bit of movement up there.

When two people are having a row, if one says, 'If you have guts, let's fight; do you think I am afraid of you?' it means he is scared to death. If he is not scared, he would have already fought. It is exactly because he is afraid that he said those words.

If Minister He was not afraid Lu Xiaofeng would jump into the water, he could not possibly say those words all of a sudden. This logic, naturally Lu Xiaofeng understood very well.

It was not after waiting for a long time did he dare to stick out his head above the water to take a breath. Immediately he found Minister He was still waiting for him by the edge of the pool. He even managed to get a bottle of wine, and was drinking merrily. He even muttered, "You soak yourself in the cold water, I am sitting up here drinking wine; no matter how much time you want to spend, I will gladly accompany you here."

By the time Lu Xiaofeng stuck out his head to take a breath for the second time, he saw that somehow Minister He had found a fishing rod. He was sitting there drinking wine and fishing; he indeed looked very elegant.

Although Lu Xiaofeng was not a very patient man, but Minister He was sitting right there drinking and fishing, even if he wanted to fish for three days and three nights, Lu Xiaofeng did not have any problem with it. It's just too bad Minister He was not fishing for fish, sooner or later Lu Xiaofeng would be caught like a fish. To make matter worse, obviously Lu Xiaofeng could not breathe under water like a fish.

When Lu Xiaofeng took a breath for the third time, a fishing line, complete with the hook, flew toward his face. If he did not duck fast enough, granted that he might not be hooked away, but a piece of flesh from his face would definitely be hooked.

Apparently not only this Minister He had a superior qinggong, his internal strength was extremely deep as well; unexpectedly he was able to concentrate his true strength on the fishing line, hence he would be able to injure people from more than a hundred steps away.

This pond was neither too deep nor too wide, no matter where Lu Xiaofeng stuck out his head, the fishing line would be able to reach him.

The fish hook at the end of the line was glittering; it was indeed a very powerful, unorthodox weapon. Although this time he was able to hide, but next time he might not have such good luck.

If a man could only stick out his head out of the water, he would be just

like a target [in archery], because the rest of his body was under water, with only his head moving, no matter what he would not be able to move fast enough.

Luckily Lu Xiaofeng had trained qigong, so that he was able to hold his breath longer than other people.

Just as he nearly could not hold much longer, he suddenly saw someone else in the pond. The water surface was not disturbed, he did not hear any splashing either; this person definitely did not jump into the water from above.

So where did he come from?

Lu Xiaofeng was hiding behind a rock inside the pond. Unexpectedly the man did not see him. It seemed that he did not even realize that there was someone else in the water. He straightened up his legs and came out of the water. His movement was nimble, his posture graceful; obviously his water skill was also very good.

But Lu Xiaofeng knew, as soon as his head is out of the water, he would suffer some pain.

The surface of the water suddenly separated, sure enough, from above the water came a scream. The legs of this full-of-life, vigorous man, who could swim like a fish, suddenly went straight. Obviously his neck was wrapped by the fishing line.

Lu Xiaofeng did not have time to sympathize with him, he immediately

swam toward the direction where the man was coming from. As expected, he found a cave, which seemed big enough for a man to squeeze through. Above the cave, a large rock was moving down. As soon as the rock was down, the cave would disappear.

What exactly was inside the cave? Why was it constructed in such a secret? Were there other people inside?

Lu Xiaofeng did not have time to ponder over these things either. With everything he had, he swam forward and slipped into the cave.

'Clack!' suddenly he was enveloped in darkness. He could not even see his own fingers. At first Lu Xiaofeng thought that he had finally found a way out; who would have thought that although he was out of the dragon pool, he now entered the hell.

Right now he really had regret, too bad it was too late for regrets. Although this hell did not have any flame to burn people, but all around him was water. No matter where he swam, he could not even find a place where he could take a breath. Rather than suffocated to death in the water like this, burned to death in hell might be a bit more delighted.

While he was almost losing his mind from anxiety, suddenly there was another 'Clack!' above him, followed by a shaft of light shot down; unexpectedly it was a sliding door.

Even if this door led straight to hell, he did not care. He went up as fast as he could. Unexpectedly above was a tunnel made of stones, there was not even a single drop of water in it.

Although the tunnel also frighteningly gloomy, in his mind it was tantamount to paradise.

The things that he had seen tonight were just like a dream. He had seen dead person who was actually alive, a living person who was actually dead, real people who were actually wooden men, dummies that were actually living people. He was simply confused and disoriented, and now finally he was able to take a breath.

There were lanterns in the tunnel, but there was no one else.

He wrung his wet clothes first before starting to move forward. For each step he took, he paused to think things over. No matter where his steps would lead him, he would simply submit himself to the will of heaven.

There was an iron door at the end of the tunnel. Unexpectedly the door was not locked.

After gingerly knocked the door and there was no response, he forcefully pulled the door and walked in. Inside was a very spacious room with stone walls. To his surprise, all kinds of Buddhist statues and wooden fish, large and small, were piled up in the room.

Lu Xiaofeng was stunned. Such a secret place, surprisingly it only contained piles of wooden fish; if he told this story to other people, who would believe him?

Even more difficult to believe, these wooden fish and Buddha statues were actually the Old Fox's cargo. He had seen all these. When the ship

sank, how did these wooden fish and Buddha statues end up in this place?

Lu Xiaofeng let out a deep breath. He warned himself that he had better leave this place, he had better go as far as he could, he had better forget that he had ever been in this place, and he had better forget that he had ever seen these wooden fish.

He believed that in these wooden fish and Buddha statues, there lies a great secret.

At first he thought that he still might be able to get out of this place alive, but if other people knew that he had found this secret, perhaps they would not give him another chance to talk.

His thinking was correct, too bad right now he was basically caught in a dead end. Besides, his curiosity has been aroused, if he quit now, in all honesty he would not be able to forgive himself.

What, exactly, was the secret behind these wooden fish?

He knew that the wooden fish was empty, he had picked a few from the beach, and he had cut them open into two halves, and used them as wooden bowl and wooden scoop.

Yet anybody with brains in their heads would never painstakingly salvage these empty wooden fish from the shipwreck, and then painstakingly brought everything to this place, and hid them in such a secret place like this one, and still had people with eyes wide open hiding

in the pond outside to guard, and to have whoever entered the pond, whether it was people or cats, be stabbed with a blade.

The people in this place seemed to be people with perfectly good brains; how could they do such thing?

Lu Xiaofeng could not stop himself from picking up a wooden fish, and knocking. Inside sounded empty; but when he tried to shake it, the wooden fish seemed to produce a series of very pleasant noise.

He still had the chamber-pot knife in his possession. Immediately he took it out and cut this wooden fish into halves. He heard clattering noise, a dozen or so objects fell from the wooden fish; unexpectedly the objects were brilliant, dazzling gems, emeralds and jades.

Lu Xiaofeng was stunned again.

He was always quite knowledgeable; naturally he could see that these gems, emeralds and jades were of considerable worth.

You can casually pick any of these, and casually give it to any girl, she would definitely turn into an obedient girl. After all, a girl like Beef Soup who did not like jewels like this was quite rare.

He cut another wooden fish open. Inside was full of pearls, as big as the fingernail of his little fingers.

There were at least three, four hundred wooden fish in that stone room. If all o them contained gems, pearls and jades, how much money would

all of these worth?

Lu Xiaofeng simply did not even dare to calculate. He was not a greedy man, but if such wealth suddenly appear in front of him, anybody would be unavoidably a bit flustered.

If the wooden fish contained jewels, what did the Buddha statues contain?

The Buddha statues were also empty. He looked for a Buddha statue bigger than a man. With his chamber pot knife he pry open the seam between the two halves first. In his heart he really wished that inside was really empty.

If such a revered Buddha was also filled with jewels, it would be preposterous beyond the most absurd dream.

'Crack!' he managed to open a crack on the Buddha statue, there was no jewels leaking out from the inside.

He sighed. But it was not clear whether it was a sigh of relieve? Or disappointment?

Suddenly the Buddha statue also sounded like it was sighing.

This Buddha statue was made of wood, how could it heave a sigh?

Although the strange things he had seen tonight were already a lot

more than someone else saw in his eighty years of lifetime, hearing the sound of the sigh, he still could not help but was startled.

Right this moment, someone from inside the Buddha statue already pounced on him, all of a sudden he clutched Lu Xiaofeng's throat. His pair of hands was icy cold, perhaps it was a monster, or perhaps a zombie?

Although Lu Xiaofeng had a gargantuan guts, he was still so scared that he almost fainted.

But he did not faint, just because as soon as these hands grabbed his throat, they became soft and mushy, without any strength at all.

Calming his nerves, Lu Xiaofeng opened his eyes wide, and saw another pair of eyes was looking at him. It's only natural that under the eyes there was a nose, under the nose there would be a mouth.

The man's lips quivered, suddenly he said three words, "Lu Xiaofeng."

Unexpectedly there was a man hidden inside the Buddha statue. It was already an inconceivably strange occurrence. These Buddha statues were part of the Old Fox's cargo, when the ship sank, they were transported here, from beginning to end there have been at least thirty, forty days. The man that was hidden inside the Buddha statue, unexpectedly he had not died, unexpectedly he was still able to speak, unexpectedly he recognized him as Lu Xiaofeng!

All the strange things Lu Xiaofeng had seen tonight combined were not as strange as this one. Even stranger still, Lu Xiaofeng unexpectedly also

know this man.

Unexpectedly, within the escort industry, compared to 'Iron Palm Golden Saber' Situ Gang, this man had more senior qualifications, his reputation was more resounding. He was none other than the Datong [district, Huainan, Anhui] Escort Agency's Zongbiaotou [head escort], the 'Titan Hawk' Ge Tong.

The Mighty Eagle Claw Skill of Huainan's Eagle Claw School has never been taught to anybody with different surname; Ge Tong was the only exception.

[1] It's a play on word: the word I translated 'delighted/delightful' was 痛快 (tong kuai), Beef Soup was saying 'soon' (快), he will be 'painful' (痛).

[2] The 'gavel' here is not hammer-like gavels of modern judge, rather, it looked like a rectangular, blackboard eraser, block of wood.

Chapter 7 – So that's what happened.

Because not only he was the third-generation Eagle Claw Wang's [lit. 'king'] adopted son, but he was the Wang Family's ideal son-in-law. He was cordial, sincere and honest; in his work he always followed the compass and went with the set square. At the age of 18 he entered the Datong Escort Agency, by the age of 31 he already risen to the position of Head Escort. The goods under his escort, not even once has there be any slip-up.

"Just find Ge Tong, all roads will be clear[1]."

Some people would rather pay double to have Ge Tong personally escort their goods.

Not in his wildest dream would Lu Xiaofeng imagine that such a character would be hidden inside a Buddha statue.

Ge Tong was even more surprised to see him. His lips moved a few times, as if he wanted to talk about a lot of things, it's a pity that he was much too weak, his lips were dry and chapped that he could not utter a single word.

Lu Xiaofeng also had a lot of questions he wanted to ask him. He was hidden inside a Buddha statue; what was the reason?

Lu Xiaofeng could not ask even a single question, because Ge Tong has completely collapsed.

Although a big bowl of nutritious, well-cooked and thick beef soup would restore his strength, but at this moment, trying to find such soup would be as difficult as ascending to the heavens.

Lu Xiaofeng stared at him for a long time, lost in thought; in his heart he suddenly remembered something even more frightening:

There were at least more than a hundred Buddha statues in here; if each Buddha statue hid one person, then what could he do?

Lu Xiaofeng did not dare to even think about it; he did not have enough courage to look at the second Buddha statue.

Right this moment, suddenly he heard very light footsteps in the tunnel. Lu Xiaofeng's heart jumped.

Who was coming?

When he came in, he was dripping wet, surely the tunnel had not dried yet; whoever the newcomer was, he would definitely know that there was an uninvited guest inside the room. Naturally Minister He would know who this uninvited guest was.

Since this person dared to come, naturally he had a way to deal with Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. He might as well sit down and wait.

The footsteps were getting closer. Someone carrying a large pot of piping hot beef soup came in. Surprisingly, it was Beef Soup.

The beef soup in the pot was hot, but the Beef Soup who carried the pot, her face was icy cold, without any emotion at all.

Right now not only it looked like she did not recognize Lu Xiaofeng, she did not even seem to see that in that stone room there was any Lu Xiaofeng at all. She slowly walked in, put the pot of soup on the floor, used a long-handled spoon to scoop a spoonful of soup, and then slowly poured the soup into the mouth of a subduing-tiger Luohan statue.

Unexpectedly a wooden Buddha statue could drink beef soup!

Beef Soup muttered, "Not only beef soup tastes good, it is nourishing. You drink it well, it may prolong your life a little bit."

The spoonful of beef soup was finished, unexpectedly the Buddha statue let out a soft moan.

Beef Soup said, "I know you don't like getting too little, but there is only one pot of beef soup, just one spoonful per person; even the big-bellied Buddha Maitreya also get only one spoonful."

Just one spoonful per person, could it be that there was a person inside each Buddha statue?

Of course by now Lu Xiaofeng was able to see that the person's mouth inside the Buddha statue happened to be right where the Buddha

statue's mouth was; so not only they were able to drink soup, they were able to breathe as well.

These people were able to live up until now, it was exactly because of a spoonful of beef soup every day.

They were tightly confined inside the nailed-down Buddha statues; they could not move even a little finger, and were able to survive relying only on a spoonful of beef soup every day. Such life, yet they have spent thirty, forty days of it. Thinking about the wrong they suffered, Lu Xiaofeng could not bear it any longer. Suddenly he sprang up and rushed over; quick as lightning he made his move.

He really wished he could confine Beef Soup in a Buddha statue, to let her taste this kind of suffering.

Beef Soup did not turn her head, she did not dodge either. Suddenly there was a 'swish!' as something was splitting the air; a fishing line, with a fishing hook at the end of the line, was flying in from the outside. The flickering, shiny fish hook was flying toward Lu Xiaofeng's eyes, as if it was going to hook his eyeball out.

Fortunately, Lu Xiaofeng was not in the water at the moment. Fortunately, his hands were able to move. Suddenly he turned around, stretched out his two fingers to pinch, and was able to catch the fish hook.

Beef Soup coldly said, "Those two fingers are indeed a bit useful; let me also give you a spoonful of beef soup!"

The long-handled spoon suddenly arrived in front of Lu Xiaofeng's mouth, it went straight toward the yingxiang [lit. 'welcoming sweet fragrance'] acupoint above his lip, below his nose. The soup in the spoon was shaken, it splashed onto Lu Xiaofeng's face.

She executed the move casually, but actually it was a very vicious attack; not only the spoon threatened his acupoint, the soup in the spoon also turned into an extremely powerful secret projectile, so that it was difficult for Lu Xiaofeng to evade it. Moreover, he was only holding the fish hook and not Minister He's hand. A shadow flashed before his eyes, Minister He had already cast the fishing line, light as a feather it swept forward.

Minister He's qinggong enabled him to move like a ghost, yet his attack was very vicious; his palm struck down on Lu Xiaofeng's shoulder. The move he used was unexpectedly the Tantric's Big Hand Print martial art.

Lu Xiaofeng was facing enemies from both sides, right away he would suffer a calamity; against expectation, suddenly he opened his mouth wide and sucked the splashing beef soup into his mouth, followed by closing his mouth quickly to bite the soup spoon.

Minister He's palm was striking down, suddenly he saw some kind of flickering, shiny object scratching toward the artery on his wrist. Unexpectedly it was his own fish hook that he had just used to hook Lu Xiaofeng's eyeball.

These moves were executed in succession, they were clever, free and at ease; other than Lu Xiaofeng, nobody else could execute it.

Too bad his teeth only bit the soup spoon and not Beef Soup's hand at all. Like an orchid, his lily-white hand already brushed toward Lu Xiaofeng's left ear. 'Adaptable Orchid Hand' separated tendons and dislocating arteries and veins. Not only its yin-natured energy malicious, the variation and changes of the technique was even more mysterious and very fast.

Lu Xiaofeng twisted his waist to evade, suddenly her hand already threatened the yuzhen [lit. jade pillow] acupoint at the back of his head.

Yuzhen acupoint is the most important among vital acupoints on human bodies. Even if it was hit by ordinary person, the effect would be unbearable. Lu Xiaofeng sighed silently; he concentrated his strength on both arms, ready to strike the formidable enemy so that both sides would perish together.

Who would have thought that in that indescribable split second, Beef Soup suddenly cried out in surprise? Her whole body flew backward and hit the stone wall, Minister He's body also flew out of the door, only after a long while did they finally heard a crash. Apparently he also crashed against the stone wall, and the crash was a lot heavier.

Someone appeared in front of Lu Xiaofeng, his smiling expression was cordial and kind; surprisingly, it was the Little Old Man.

What move did he use that in a split second he was able to fling Beef Soup and Minister He away like that? Even Lu Xiaofeng, who had keen eyes, could not see it clearly. It was only now that Lu Xiaofeng realized that this Little Old Man was such a martial art expert that he had never seen in his life before.

Beef Soup already stood up. She seemed to be astonished, but was also very angry.

The Little Old Man smiled and asked tenderly, "Are you hurt?"

Beef Soup shook her head.

The Little Old Man said, "In that case, you must be drunk just like Minister He, way too drunk. Otherwise, how could you forget what I told you?"

His voice was even gentler, but Beef Soup's eyes suddenly showed fear.

The Little Old Man said, "Drunk people should be lying in bed, you also ought to go to bed."

Immediately Beef Soup left with her head hung low. When she walked past Lu Xiaofeng, she suddenly smiled. Her smile was very sweet. Anybody who saw her smiling would never have imagined that she was the same person who just now was bent on putting Lu Xiaofeng to death.

Even Lu Xiaofeng himself could not imagine that.

Watching her walked out, the Little Old Man suddenly asked, "Do you know what her nickname is?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not know. Naturally her nickname was not 'Beef Soup'.

The Little Old Man said, "She is called 'Honeybee'!"

"Honeybee?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Exactly," the Little Old Man said, "The Honeybee who after mating with the male would swallow her lover into her tummy."

Lu Xiaofeng blushed.

But the Little Old Man's laughter was very cheerful, "I know that as a father, I should not criticize my daughter like that," he said, "But I want you to know why she is bent on killing you." He patted Lu Xiaofeng's shoulder, "You should understand by now that all these were not my idea."

Lu Xiaofeng probed further, "So it was because these were not your idea that I am able to make it this far?"

The Little Old Man did not deny at all; he said with a smile, "Killing people is not a difficult matter, but killing people using sophisticated technique, now that's not an easy thing to do."

His hand lightly pushed the stone wall, immediately a door appeared, the furnishing inside the room was elegant and graceful. He led Lu Xiaofeng inside, took a crystal wine bottle from a cupboard hanging on the wall, and leisurely said, "Grape wine in luminous cup, this one I especially had people sent in from Persia, you try it."

He also took a flat-bottomed square goblet, inside was some kind of dark, blackish-colored thick paste; he said with a smile, "This is butterfly shark's egg. North of Kunlun, a lot of people call it 'Caviar'. The idea was to make fish eggs into thick paste and eat it to accompany the wine. The flavor is exceptionally good."

Lu Xiaofeng was unable to bear not to have a taste. His mouth only tasted something fishy and salty, not an especially good thing to eat.

The Little Old Man said, "Butterfly sharks were super abundant ten million years ago, but recently extinct. It was mentioned in the 'Mao Shi Yi Shu' [don't ask, I don't know what it is. Mao – coarse/unfinished, Shi – poem, Yi – righteousness, Shu – commentary/annotation.]: 'The big ones are King Tuna, the small ones are Tail Tuna, the proper fish to be drawn in the present day from rivers of the capital-level of all regions'. The 'Compendium of Medical Herbs[2]' and 'Mr. Lu's Spring and Autumn Annals[3]' also have written account related to this fish. Try it again, you'll find out its different flavor."

Apparently not only this Little Old Man was extremely particular about fine food, he was also an elegant scholar who read extensively the Book of Songs and the Book of History.

Lu Xiaofeng simply had to have another taste. Sure enough, other than the fishy and salty taste, there was another indescribable flavor, delicious and exquisite.

The Little Old Man said, "I brought this back myself the last time I went to Fusang Islands. Not much is left. It seems that I will have to make another trip over there soon."

"Do you go there often?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Little Old Man nodded and said, "Nowadays Fusang country is under Toyotomi Hideyoshi's rule[4]. This man is a formidable and ruthless character with enormous ambition; he has had the desire to lay his hands on our country and Korea for a long time."

His laughter was even more cheerful as he continued, "Those pearls and jewels outside are actually a special gift from an important person in our imperial court for him, but I intercepted it midway."

"Did you rig the Old Fox's boat that it capsized?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Little Old Man's expression turned serious as he replied, "How can I do such a crude thing? I just happen to know that a storm would happen on the sea at that particular time."

Storms at sea can be predicted. It was clear that this Little Old Man also had done extensive study on astronomy and meteorology. Lu Xiaofeng felt more and more that not only this Little Old Man was a genius of the current age, his martial art and literature knowledge was also very deep and immeasurable. He could not help but probing him further, "Hence you intentionally delayed and prolonged the Old Fox's ship-loading process so that his ship would be caught in that storm?"

The Little Old Man said, "Unfortunately I still miscalculated by half a day so that I had no choice but to force him to come back to get fresh water."

All the sailors on the Old Fox's ship were experienced veterans, how could they forget such an important matter like loading fresh water?

It was only then did Lu Xiaofeng understand the peculiarity of this matter.

The Little Old Man continued, "The hardest thing was to make the ship perished right at the emerging warm current."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Little Old Man explained, "Because this warm current flowed toward our island, so that after the storm, it would transport the ship's cargo here, basically we did not need to act at all." He smiled, and then continued, "It was also because of this warm current that you could come here."

"Why did you have to take all those trouble?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Wouldn't robbing the ship be a lot more convenient?"

"Because I am not a robber," the Little Old Man said matter-of-factly, "Robbing goods and boarding ships are the things that pirates do. For me, it's not worth doing at all."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. This seemingly inexplicable matter, now he finally understood half of it. Obviously Yue Yang was working for him; he knew early on that the ship would meet with danger, hence he repeatedly blocked Lu Xiaofeng, not letting Lu Xiaofeng to ride on the ship, so much

so that he even beat Lu Xiaofeng off the ship.

The Little Old Man laughed and said, "If those pearls and jewels were delivered to Fusang, there will be a big mess in our Central Earth. Although I have lived overseas for a long time, my heart is still with the old country. By doing this thing, I did not do it entirely for my own sake."

"How did you know about this matter?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Who's the important person in our imperial court who's in collusion with Toyotomi Hideyoshi?"

The Little Old Man took his time sipping his wine, nibbled at the butterfly shark's eggs, and then slowly said, "In our line of business, there are four words that we must not forget!"

"And those four words are?" Lu Xiaofeng prompted.

The Little Old Man said, "Guard your mouth like a closed bottle." [Orig. shou kou ru ping – four characters]

Lu Xiaofeng finally asked him the question he had been dying to ask, "What is actually your line of business?"

"Murder!" the Little Old Man replied.

He spoke plainly and was completely at ease. Although Lu Xiaofeng has had a vague guess, he still could not help but was shocked.

The Little Old Man said, "This is the second oldest profession in the world, but it is far more stimulating, far more colorful, far more exciting than the oldest profession!" He laughed, and then said, "Also, the revenue in this line of business is definitely better."

"What is the oldest profession in the world?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Prostitution," the Little Old Man replied. He laughed again before continuing, "Since time immemorial, women have mastered the skill of prostitution, they prostitute themselves using all kinds of methods, but murder can only be done using one method."

"There is only one?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Absolutely only one," the Little Old Man replied.

"Which one?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Little Old Man replied, "The one that is absolutely safe." And then he added, "After committing the murder, not only we have to escape unscathed, we must absolutely not leaving any trace either. Therefore, although there are many tools that can be used in murder, there is absolutely only one proper method to do it."

He used the word 'absolutely' three times in a row to emphasis the exactitude of this matter. And then he continued, "This matter not only requires a great deal of skill, it also requires a very precise plan, enormous intelligence and patience; therefore, for the last several years, the number of people qualified enough to join this line of business has

become less and less."

"What qualification can be considered enough?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Little Old Man replied, "First, their own lives must be clean."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "To be killer, why must they have a clean life?"

The Little Old Man said, "Because if there is the slightest bit of bad record in his life, there will be people who will suspect him before and after the murder. Just in case someone investigates his movements, it will be hard for us to avoid being implicated."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "Makes sense," he said. It was only now that he understood that only those with clean lives are qualified enough to kill.

The Little Old Man continued, "Second, naturally they must have enormous intelligence and patience. Third, they must be able to bear hardships and willing to work hard, enduring humiliation as part of an important mission. Those who love to enjoy the limelight absolutely cannot be in this line of business."

"Therefore," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Those in this line of business must be nameless people."

The Little Old Man said, "Not only they must be nameless, they must be invisible as well."

Lu Xiaofeng's heart was moved, "Invisible? How can a person be invisible?"

"There are many ways for a person to be invisible," the Little Old Man replied, "It's not magic at all."

"I don't understand," Lu Xiaofeng said.

The Little Old Man raised his wine cup and said, "Can you see clearly, what's inside this cup?"

"It's a cup of wine," Lu Xiaofeng replied. Naturally he could see clearly that it was a cup of wine.

The Little Old Man said, "If you cannot see clearly, won't this cup of wine be invisible?"

Lu Xiaofeng pondered deeply. He seemed to understand this logic, yet he was not completely clear.

The Little Old Man said, "When the foam enter the ocean, the cup of wine is poured back into the wine pot, it's the same as it is being invisible, because people cannot see it, they cannot find it even more. Some people are just like that."

He smiled before continuing, "As soon as these people blend into a sea of people, it will be the same as a grain of rice sneaking into a shi [unit of (dry) volume, approx. 100 liters/22.7 (dry) gallon] of rice. Anybody who wants to find them will find it super difficult. Won't that be the same as

being invisible?"

"Phew!" Lu Xiaofeng whistled. With a bitter laugh he said, "In normal times, even if you walk back and forth in front of me, I will never see anything special about you."

The Little Old Man rubbed his palms together and said, "Exactly. I knew you would understand."

"Other than that," Lu Xiaofeng said, "There is another way."

"Oh?" the Little Old Man said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "If you have another identity, for example, if you are a big hero of the river and ocean [i.e. the world], then you are tantamount to being invisible; because people would only see your identity as the big hero, they would never see you as a murderer or an assassin."

"I told you one and you understood three," the Little Old Man exclaimed, "Like children who are open to instruction!" And then he continued, "But, even if someone meets all these qualifications, it is still not enough."

"What else must he have?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Little Old Man said, "To be in this line of business, he must have a singular animal instinct, his reflex must be unusually quick; before the real danger arrives, he must already be prepared. Therefore, after I found such a man, I have to test him whether he has this kind of quality or not?"

"What kind of test?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Little Old Man replied, "Only in a life and death crisis would a man display his entire ability; hence I must let him meet all kinds of danger."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Are you saying that you need to have all kinds of people to plot against him?"

"Correct," the Little Old Man replied.

At last Lu Xiaofeng understood. "Those people who plotted against Yue Yang, did you send them out to test him?" he asked.

"That's right," the Little Old Man replied.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "If he did not pass the test, won't he die under those people's hands?"

The Little Old Man flatly said, "If he could not stand all those tests, and then later on he died in a mission, it would be better if he died early, so as to avoid implicating other people."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "That one-eyed old fisherman and that horse-faced man, were they your subordinates?"

The Little Old Man said, "They were no more than the shell outside the walnut, the skin outside the fruit. They would never be able to come in

contact with the core."

"Your daughter killed them," Lu Xiaofeng said, "It was because they revealed their identity in my presence?"

The Little Old Man sighed and said, "My daughter is very talented, her only flaw is that she likes to kill people too much."

"What about Minister He?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Little Old Man said, "I told you: she is very talented, especially in dealing with men."

Lu Xiaofeng finally understood. Minister He wanted to kill him, it was only to curry Beef Soup's favor.

The Little Old Man said with a bitter laugh, "It's just that this kind of talent is purely an inborn talent; in some places she is not like me at all."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "But her 'Adaptable Orchid Hand' can't be an inborn talent."

Adaptable Orchid Hand and Bone-transforming Cotton Palm are the same, both require long training where someone must pass on the secret theory behind it. Recently, not only nobody in Jianghu was able to use it, nobody has even seen it either.

The Little Old Man took a sip of his wine again before replying

unhurriedly, "Her aptitude in learning martial art is not bad, it's just that her strength is a bit too weak; therefore, I only taught her one or two martial art skills."

Lu Xiaofeng's heart was moved, "You taught her the Adaptable Orchid Hand?" he asked.

The Little Old Man smiled and said, "This martial art skill is not difficult at all. Some people would never master it even if they train forever. But as long as you understand the key, plus a bit of intelligence and patience, you would be able to master it at most for five years."

Lu Xiaofeng's voice cracked, "Only five years and she already mastered it?"

The Little Old Man said, "In the old days, when the Ruyi Fairy, who was equally famous with Huagu Deity[5], trained this martial art, she only spent three years. My daughter loves leisure and hates hard work, yet she only trained for five years."

Ruyi Fairy was an unequalled talent of the Wulin world; no matter which school or sect's martial art, as long as she saw it twice, she would master it. But when her own daughter practiced this Adaptable Orchid Hand, she spent the whole thirty years, before finally she became both mentally and physically exhausted, threw up some blood, and died. Beef Soup only trained for five years to master it, it could already be considered a wonder.

Lu Xiaofeng could not help not to ask, "When you train this martial art, how long did you take to master it?"

"I was a bit quicker," the Little Old Man replied.

"How much quicker?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Little Old Man hesitated, as if he was reluctant to say it; however, Lu Xiaofeng was insistent, he simply must have the answer [orig. 'smashing an earthenware pot, asking to the end'].

Finally the Little Old Man laughed and said, "It took me only three months."

Lu Xiaofeng stared at him blankly.

"The Bone-transforming Cotton Palm is a lot harder," the Little Old Man said, "I had to train for more than a year before mastering it somewhat. Finger Blade and Hazy Strength Skill are not easy either. As for those martial art that rely on style variation to score a victory, all of those are no more than cheap trick that the children use."

He played down his achievements, but Lu Xiaofeng listened to him with his eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped.

If a man was really proficient in those martial arts, it was indeed a miracle of miracles; it was simply inconceivable.

Lu Xiaofeng could not help asking, "Those martial arts that you mentioned, do you master all those?"

"I can't really say that I master them," the little old man said, "I only know very little about them."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Minister He, the moustache, and the others, did you teach them martial arts?"

The little old man said, "They only know a bit of superficial skill, it can't be considered anything."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed; forcing a smile, he said, "Their martial art skills, I have seen those. Any one of them can be considered a martial art expert in Jianghu. If even they cannot be considered anything, won't those famous heroes in Jianghu become rubbish?"

The little old man indifferently said, "Those people are indeed rubbish."

If other people said those words, Lu Xiaofeng would definitely think that he was an arrogant lunatic. But since those words came from the little old man's mouth, Lu Xiaofeng could only keep his mouth shut.

The little old man poured a cup of wine for him. He said, "I know that you made your name very early, and now you are even more famous. There is something I've always wanted to ask you."

"If I know the answer, I would definitely answer it," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"In your opinion," the little old man said, "If someone wants to be

famous, is it extremely difficult?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not need to think; he immediately replied, "Not difficult."

The little old man asked, "People like you and me, if we want to stay nameless forever?"

Lu Xiaofeng replied, "That would have been very difficult."

Sometimes fame is just like disease, when it wants to come, nobody can resist it.

The little old man chuckled and said, "You are a smart man, that's why you are able to say that. Seeking fame is indeed not difficult; if I had that desire, I could have shaken the world before I was sixteen."

Lu Xiaofeng only listened in silence.

The little old man continued, "By now you should have understood why I told you all these things."

Lu Xiaofeng took a deep breath. "You want me to join you in this line of business?" he said.

The little old man said, "Your fame is precisely your cover. Just like you said, other people only see you as Lu Xiaofeng, nobody would see you as a murderer."

Without waiting for Lu Xiaofeng to reply, he added, "The people that I want to kill are all the people who deserve to die; I would never let you to have a guilty conscience. Your talent and intelligence far surpass Yue Yang's. I do need people like you, but I never wish to force you against your will."

Lu Xiaofeng exhaled slowly. "Do I have a choice in this matter?" he asked.

"Of course you do," the little old man replied, "Not only that, you may take your time to consider it carefully. Once you are convinced, you may give me your answer."

He smiled, and then continued, "Right now you are a very wealthy person, I am sure you will enjoy living here. I can guarantee you that from now on, nobody will give you any trouble."

"Is it alright for me to take more time to consider?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The little old man replied, "Of course you may. I will not give you any time limit at all, I will not limit your movement either. Whatever you wish to do, wherever you wish to go, you may go."

He stood up, but suddenly laughed and said, "I only want to warn you of one thing."

"What is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The little old man said, "Beware of the honeybee."

[1] Another play on words. The character 'tong' in Ge Tong's name means 'go through/open/clear'.

[2] Compendium of Medical Herbs, compiled by Li Shizhen, 1596.

[3] Mr. Lu's Spring and Autumn Annals, compiled ca. 239 BC under the patronage of Qin Dynasty Chancellor Lu Buwei.

[4] Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598), Japanese warlord, undisputed ruler of Japan, 1590-1598.

[5] Ruyi means 'as one wishes', which I translated as 'adaptable' in the 'Adaptable Orchid Hand'. Huagu means 'bone transforming'. Actually, the original uses 'Xianzi' for Ruyi, and 'Xianren' for Huagu. Both means 'deity' or 'celestial being' or 'Daoist immortal'.

Chapter 8 – A beauty's favor

Eighth day of the sixth month, night.

The main hall of the Twelve-Dock Alliance headquarter was brightly lit, the security outside the hall was very tight. After going the affair of the Duanyang Day of the fifth month, the number of guards and checkpoints was doubled, especially today. The three different teams who were sent to investigate have returned, the leaders were now assembled in the main hall, one by one they reported the result of their investigation.

The first to stand up was Xiong Tianjian. He led the first team back to the little town at the foot of Taihang Mountains. After spending thirty-tree days on open enquiries and secret search, this was the result:

"The inn where the escort warriors spent the night is called Yue Lai [lit. 'pleased to come']. Because it is a remote area, land is of little value, hence the inn is built over a large tract of land. Altogether there are thirty nine rooms."

"We have carefully searched every inch of all thirty-nine rooms, there is no bloodstain at all, there isn't any vestige of weapons or secret projectiles either. It can be said that there is nothing suspicious at all."

"The locals consist of a hundred and seventy-eight households. Most of them are native born and bred, we investigated every house and asked if there was any suspicious people in the vicinity a few days before and after the incident."

"The only thing that can be considered suspicious was that the morning before the incident, there was a group of carpenters arrived, with several large carts of wood. They said the wood was to make Buddha statues and wooden fish."

"But these people were gone by that evening. We followed this clue and found out that these people were actually the carpenters from the Taiping Prince's Mansion; there is nothing suspicious at all. Hence, the result of this investigation is just like there is no result at all."

It was the same with the second team, led by Ye Xingshi, all the renowned experts of Jianghu who were adept at using blades, within the four hours [orig. 'two sichen'] of the morning of Duanyang, no one was within five hundred li of the Twelve-Dock Alliance's territory. Moreover, every single one of them had strong alibi.

Finally the third team, led by Wang Yi, showed a bit of result, but the distance toward the thirty-five million taels was still very far away.

Therefore, everyone's hope was placed on Ying Yan Laoqi. Right now it was only seven days away from the time limit set by the Heir Apparent.

Ying Yan Laoqi's news was even more discouraging. "Lu Xiaofeng has gone out to sea on a long journey, I am afraid he'll never come back."

After leaving the Crouching Cloud Building, he immediately went to the port in that coastal area to make inquiry.

He found the Fox Den.

But on the day of his visit, this place, which was a world-famous amorous place, was cold and cheerless.

Because the news of their boss' ship capsized has arrived. Reportedly everybody on board perished, not a single soul survived.

Ying Yan Laoqi was unwilling to give up; he inquired further, "Have you seen any man with four-eyebrows?"

They have, and they remembered.

People whose moustache and eyebrows looked the same are not many. It has always been very easy for Lu Xiaofeng to leave deep impression of other people's mind.

"That man also boarded our boss' ship."

"The ship that capsized?"

"That's right."

Unexpectedly, the result of the three teams was totally nothing. Those hundred and three astute, capable and experienced escorts, plus thirty-five million taels worth of goods, were just like a stone thrown into the ocean, it disappeared without a trace.

The seven days deadline would pass in the blink of an eye. Everybody

looked at each other in dismay, nobody knew what to do.

Ying Yan Laoqi suddenly said, "There is one thing we can do."

"What is it?" everybody immediately asked.

Ying Yan Laoqi stood up; he looked at the stone pillars outside the main hall, and slowly said, "We can strike our heads against the pillar over there."

When Lu Xiaofeng came out of the little old man's private room, it was precisely early morning of the eighth day of the sixth month. The sky was sunny and cloudless, the sun was shining brightly, although the sea breeze was blocked by the mountain peaks on all sides, the weather was still cool and pleasant.

He did not come out the same way he came in at all. Hence he did not go through the room full of wooden fish, and he did not need to swim through the pond.

The exit of this tunnel was located near the lotus pond under the nine-bend winding bridge. When he was already out, he suddenly remembered that he forgot to ask the little old man one important question: "If I want to sleep, where should I go?"

The little old man apparently believed that he would be able to deal with this kind of matter; hence he did not even mention it. Perhaps he did not realize that sleeping is just like eating, both are vital to living human beings.

Right now Lu Xiaofeng only hoped that he could find Yue Yang. Although it was unlikely that Yue Yang would find him a place to sleep, he could at least lead him back to his own small thatched hut.

Golden house or silver house, nothing is as good as his own dog house; besides, there was an old friend whose mouth was always wide open.

Remembering this old friend, he suddenly remembered something else, "I wonder if there is also someone inside the old friend's big tummy? This man did not have any beef soup; I wonder if he is already died."

Remembering this little fact, Lu Xiaofeng wanted to go back even more.

Lu Xiaofeng was homesick. Thinking about it, he himself could not help feeling amused.

Too bad that he could not find Yue Yang, but he saw Sha Man instead.

Hundreds of flowers in full bloom, under the sunny sky it looked even more gorgeous. Sha Man was standing in the middle of a cluster of flowers, wearing a light and soft gown, without any makeup on her face. Next to her, the hundreds of flowers seemed to lose their splendor.

She just stood there, without moving or opening her mouth.

Unable to restrain his emotions, Lu Xiaofeng walked toward her.

Suddenly she turned around and walked away. Lu Xiaofeng followed her involuntarily, through a flowery footpath paved with vermillion stones, ahead was a tall cluster of Chinese rose, almost like a canopy, and there was a tiny cabin in the middle.

She pushed the door open and walked in. Undoubtedly this little cabin was the place where she stayed.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly remembered the Mansion of Spirits. From the look of it, this place seemed to have so many places that were similar to the Mansion of Spirits [see Book 5: Mansion of Spirits – still work in progress at the time of this writing], yet essentially it was completely different, Lu Xiaofeng's experience were also different.

Before he went to the Mansion of Spirits, he had had emotional preparation, he was aware early on what kind of place the place was.

All the people in the Mansion of Spirits had been dead once, and then living incognito over there. But the people in this place were all virtually nameless.

Although the Old Sabre Honcho was an amazing character, this little old man was a strange character without equal in this age, with a frighteningly sharp intelligence, so deep and immeasurable. Compared to him, the Old Sabre Honcho was no more than a small stream next to the ocean.

The cabin door was still open, there was no sound at all from the inside.

Lu Xiaofeng finally could not help walking in. Sha Man was waiting behind the door, she closed the door, and wrapped her arms around her.

Her lips were burning hot, her body was fiery.

By the time Lu Xiaofeng awoke, it was almost dusk.

She was standing at the window, with her back toward him. Her slim waist stretched down toward her well-rounded buttocks, her long, slender legs were perfectly straight.

Lu Xiaofeng could not keep his eyes off of her; he nearly lost his mind.

It felt like a dream, an absurd yet sweet dream; he could never have imagined why she would treat him like that.

He wanted to sit up, to walk over and embrace her again, but his limbs felt weak and devoid of any strength, he could not even move.

She did not turn around, but she must be aware that he was awake. Suddenly she asked a very strange question, "Did you kill Fei Tian Yu Hu?" [see Book 4: Silver Hook Casino, Flying Jade Tiger, lit. jade tiger flying to the sky.]

At this moment, nobody could have imagined that she would ask such question.

Fei Tian Yu Hu was crafty and cruel, in the battle at the Silver Hook

Casino, Lu Xiaofeng were nearly killed under his hands. Lu Xiaofeng could not imagine that she would ask such question either. "You know him?" he could not help not to ask.

Sha Man still has not turned around, but her shoulders were trembling, as if she was deeply shaken.

After a long time, she finally said slowly, "His real name was Jiang Yufei, my original name is actually Jiang Shaman."

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked, "So you were brother and sister?" he asked.

"That's right," Sha Man replied.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart sank. Suddenly he understood why she treated him like that. Turned out it was because she wanted to exact revenge for her older brother.

But she did not have any confidence that she would be able to deal with Lu Xiaofeng, hence she could only use the women's most primitive weapon.

Such weapon has always been very effective.

Right now his limbs were soft; presumably he had fallen into her evil scheme in his dream after his soul was captured in ecstasy by her charm.

Lu Xiaofeng could only comfort himself in his heart, "I am able to make

it this far, I am already lucky. To be able to die at the hands of such woman, it could be considered very lucky. What am I complaining about?"

As long as one is free of worried thoughts, there is nothing in the world complaining or losing his sleep over.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly chuckled; he said, "Although I did not personally kill him, but he did die because of me. If I had a second chance, perhaps I'd kill him with my own hands."

Sha Man was silent for a long time before speaking slowly, "More than once I made an oath, no matter who killed him, I will give him my body as a reward. I have no other way to express my gratitude."

Her voice was brimming with sorrow and hate.

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked. "Why?" he asked.

Sha Man's body shook again as she said, "Although he was my older brother, he had destroyed my life."

Lu Xiaofeng did not ask further. He understood this kind of situation, people like Fei Tian Yu Hu are capable of committing any kind of despicable and disgraceful things.

Sha Man still has not turned around. She continued, "I made a promise to myself, and now I have fulfilled it. You may go now."

"I am not leaving," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Sha Man suddenly turned around, the streak of tears on her pale face had not dried, but her beautiful eyes shone with rage, and became as sharp as blade. "What else do you want?" she asked coldly, "Could it be that you want one more time?"

These words were also as sharp as blade.

Lu Xiaofeng knew that if he left now, next time they met, they would be like strangers. But if he hugged her, even though she might refuse him, perhaps he would not even have a chance to see her again.

If he neither walk over nor embrace her, why would he stay here and just stare blankly at her?

He felt he was such an idiot, really an idiot.

Sha Man stared at him. Gradually her eyes turned gentle.

If he was really like the fickle Dengtu Zi of the folklore[1], even if he did not leave right now, he may not necessarily take the opportunity to hug her again.

Either way, he had already obtained her, why would he still want to have another opportunity to see her later on?

She had seen the passionate, weak side of his heart, yet she still had to let him go.

Suddenly someone shouted outside, "Ninth Young Master is back, Ninth Young Master is back!"

Sha Man's face suddenly carried a strange expression, like that of a little child's when he did something and was suddenly caught by his parents.

Yet Lu Xiaofeng chuckled and said, "You might as well leave first, I'll also leave very soon. What happened today, I will certainly forget it soon."

He laughed again, but anybody ought to be able to see that it was a forced laugh.

Sha Man did not leave, she sat down instead, she sat down on the head of his bed.

"Do you want me to leave first?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"You don't have to leave," Sha Man replied.

"You ..." Lu Xiaofeng started.

But Sha Man's expression turned even stranger; she said, "I am not afraid other people will know what I did, no matter how long you want to stay here, I don't care."

Lu Xiaofeng looked at her; he gently reached out and grabbed her hand, as he slipped out of the bed and draped his clothes over his shoulders. Suddenly he laughed and said, "I have something I'd like to give you, but I am not sure if you'd accept it."

"What do you want to give me?" Sha Man asked.

"My chamber pot knife," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Sha Man stared at him again, there was a hint of smile on her beautiful pair of eyes. Finally she really broke into laughter.

Lu Xiaofeng has never seen her laugh.

Her laugh was just like a melting glacier, like spring returning to the earth, like the flower buds blooming under the sunshine.

Lu Xiaofeng also broke into laughter. They laughed together. Nobody knew how long they were laughing, but suddenly two drops of sparkling and translucent tears appeared on the corner of her eyes, and flowed down on her pale, beautiful cheeks.

Suddenly she also stood up. She pulled Lu Xiaofeng's hand rather forcefully, yet she spoke tenderly, "Please don't go."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng's voice was gruff.

Sha Man said, "Because I ... I don't want you to go."

She embraced him again. Her lips were icy-cold, but it was as soft and sweet-smelling as a budding flower.

This time they did not have flaming desire, there was only tender sentiments, as gentle and soft as water.

A long, long time ago, there was a sage who once said something that other people would remember forever.

The sage said: friendship is cultivated over a period of time, but love comes suddenly. Friendship will definitely stand the test of time, love is often fleeting.

This fleeting time is such a splendid time, such a glorious time, such a beautiful time.

This fleeting time is eternal.

The wind was gently blowing outside the window, twilight has descended upon the earth.

Midsummer days' twilight, it was bright, and hazy, and strong ...

What a wonderful life, what a wonderful feeling.

Whether the door was not bolted, or the window was not closed, nobody knows. Like a floating cloud someone flew in, and then like a

cloud he floated out again.

They did not see him; they did not even know that someone has come in and come back out.

But they did see that he left a flower.

An ice crystal flower.

It was the middle of summer, the flower was carved out of a block of ice, the translucent petals have not started to melt.

How far from here would a place have to be to have winter ice storehouse?

How much painstaking effort would it take to carve this ice flower and bring it here?

Although it was only a tiny ice crystal flower, who could possibly estimate its value?

Who could tell how much tenderness this ice flower contains? How much love?

Other than divine-dragon-like Ninth Young Master, who else could accomplish such thing?

He knew that she never valued worldly possessions. He knew she hated the heat; on this island in the South China Sea, all year long she would never see ice and snow.

Therefore, he brought this ice flower back just for her; he personally delivered this gift to his beloved.

But when he came, she was in the arms of another man. He only left behind the ice flower, and quietly went away.

[1] From the dictionary: Dengtu Zi, famous lecherous character, an idiom for 'lecher' or 'skirt chaser'.

Chapter 9 – Falling under an evil scheme

Lu Xiaofeng looked at the ice flower, suddenly an unspeakable bad feeling arose in his heart, but it was unclear whether he felt bad for the arrogant but sentimental man? Or was it for himself?

He did not look at her expression.

He was afraid to look.

But he could not bear not to ask, "Is it him?"

Sha Man slowly nodded. Unexpectedly her pale face was devoid of any emotions.

"Actually, what kind of man is he?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Sha Man's voice was equally emotionless, "Why must we talk about other people's business? Why don't you tell me about yourself?"

She buttoned the front piece of Lu Xiaofeng's gown, with a very sweet smile she said, "There is a tiny kitchen at the back, let me prepare some dishes for you. There's a bit of wine in the cabinet, I may be able to accompany you for two cups."

Lu Xiaofeng looked at her. Not only he saw her beauty, he also saw the feeling she had for him. His own heart felt like it was so full of emotions that it was about to burst; he could not help hugging her again.

Suddenly a sound of knocking echoed from the outside, someone said in low voice, "This is Xiao Yu [little jade], Ninth Young Master sent me here specifically to invite Miss Man to dinner."

The smile immediately vanished from Sha Man's face; she said coldly, "I am not going, I don't have time."

Xiao Yu was still unwilling to leave; she implored from outside the door, "If Miss Man is not coming, Ninth Young Master is going to scold me."

Sha Man suddenly rushed toward the door and opened it. "Didn't you see that I have a guest here?" she said.

Xiao Yu looked up, and was shocked to see Lu Xiaofeng. "I ... I ..." she stammered.

With a calm expression Sha Man said, "You should have seen it yourself, in fact, he has also seen it himself. If he really wanted to invite me to dinner, why didn't he tell me himself just now?"

Xiao Yu did not dare to speak anymore, with head hung low she walked away quietly; but while she was leaving, she could not resist stealing a glance toward Lu Xiaofeng. She seemed to be surprised, but also curious; as if she would never have imagined that she would see another man in Miss Man's room.

But Sha Man really was not afraid other people would see her actions, she was not afraid anybody would know. If Sha Man was determined to

do something, she could not care less about what other people would think or what their opinion would be.

Shutting the door, she suddenly turned around and asked Lu Xiaofeng, "Can you wait for me here? I am going out for a moment, and will be back soon."

Lu Xiaofeng nodded.

She ought to go. After all, they had several years' worth of feeling between them, not to mention he had just returned from a faraway journey.

Sha Man could clearly see his thought; she said, "I am not going to have dinner at all, but there is something I must talk to him."

She quickly dressed, picked up the melting ice flower, and went out the door. She turned her head around and said to Lu Xiaofeng, "You must wait for me here."

Lu Xiaofeng found wine in the cabinet. Alone he sat down, but he could not even drink wine. He only felt that this elegant room has suddenly turned into an unspeakably hollow and lonesome place, forcing him to ask himself, "Actually, what kind of man am I? By doing what I did, am I harming others? Or myself?"

Although the little old man told him that he ought to decide about everything himself, yet the fact was that his fate was completely under other people's hands; right now he was powerless to even protect himself,

how was he going to protect her?

But right now he had no choice but to let her fall into difficulty. In this place, that Ninth Young Master definitely held the power to manipulate other people's fate.

He wanted to leave, but could not bear to go. He stood up, and sat back down. He poured a cup of wine and was about to drink when suddenly he heard someone said with a laugh, "Won't it be too boring to drink alone? Why don't you pour another cup for me?"

Although he had not heard her laughter for a very long time, he still recognized her laughter clearly.

With laughter as clear as silver bells, Beef Soup walked in. Her smile looked radiant. When she was laughing, she was a lot more mesmerizing than when she was not laughing.

But Lu Xiaofeng only shot her a cold look. "And now you recognize me again?" he asked.

Beef Soup said, "Even if you burn to ashes, I will still recognize you. It's just that in front of other people, how can I show any affection to you?"

She snatched the cup in Lu Xiaofeng's hand and plopped herself down on his lap. In a tender voice she said, "But now we can show affection to each other. You may show your affection any way you want."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Your Ninth Brother has come back, why don't you

drink with him?"

Beef Soup laughed. "Are you drinking vinegar [i.e. jealous]?" she asked, "Do you know what is he to me? He is my sibling."

Lu Xiaofeng was clearly taken aback; he could not help but ask, "What kind of man he really is?"

He had asked this same question to Honest Monk, and he had asked Sha Man, but they did not give him any answer.

Beef Soup let out a soft sigh, she said, "Actually, I myself can't say for sure what kind of man he really is."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Beef Soup replied, "Because in all honesty he is too complex, too strange; but even that treasured Papa of mine also said that he is such an amazing talent."

Speaking about this man, immediately her eyes shone. She continued, "Sometimes he seems to be very stupid, oftentimes he got lost, he could not even tell east from west. If you asked him: from a hundred people, seventeen died, how many left? Probably he is going to find a hundred people, kill seventeen, and count the remainder, before he could give you the answer."

She went on, "But no matter how difficult any martial art skill is, as soon as he trains, he will master it. No matter how tightly guarded any place is,

he can come and go as he pleases. No matter what it is that you are thinking, before you say it, he already know. If you want him to kill someone, no matter where that person is hiding, no matter how many people are protecting him, he will not fail."

"Never fail?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Beef Soup chuckled. "Perhaps you don't believe me," she said, "But certainly Honest Monk knows."

"Did they fight?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Beef Soup said, "Someone with Honest Monk's level of martial art skill, they would not last three moves under his hands."

Lu Xiaofeng was silent. He knew that she was not bragging at all, he had seen Honest Monk coming out of the chest with his own eyes.

Beef Soup said, "He does not gamble, he does not drink, he does not like other things that men like to do."

Lu Xiaofeng coldly said, "Other than murder, what else does he do?"

Beef Soup said, "When he is not doing anything, he usually sits alone on the beach, staring at the sea. Sometimes two, three days he did not say anything, sometimes he sat by the sea for three days, not only he did not eat a thing, he did not even drink a drop."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Maybe he secretly sate a few fish, it's just that you did not see it."

Beef Soup said, "Maybe you won't believe me, but his endurance is really something that nobody else can do; he is able to stay at the bottom of the ocean for a day and a night without coming out."

"Are you saying that he is a fish, who can breathe under water?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Beef Soup said, "He is just like someone who doesn't need to breathe. One time for some reason my old man was very angry with him, he nailed him inside a coffin, and buried him four, five days. Later on other people could not bear it, they dug the coffin out and opened the lid to look inside." She looked at Lu Xiaofeng, "Can you guess how he was?"

With a straight face Lu Xiaofeng said, "He had turned into a zombie; perhaps all along he has always been a zombie."

Beef Soup laughed and said, "He simply stood up, patted his clothes, and walked away. He did not speak even one word."

Although with his mouth Lu Xiaofeng spoke sharp and unkind words, in his heart he actually could not help but admire this man.

He also knew that it was not a myth, if someone practiced Indian Yoga to perfection, they could do some incredible things. He had personally seen an Indian fakir put into a metal trunk, and was drowned into the bottom of the sea. Three days later unexpectedly came out from the

metal trunk, alive and well.

Beef Soup said, "Although he is eccentric and reclusive, everybody here loves him very much, because he often did a lot of things for other people, while he himself never asked for a single thing. Concerning wealth, he did not have any regard at all. You only need to open your mouth, as long as he has it, doesn't matter how much, he will give it all to you."

She said, "Girls are helplessly drawn to him, it's a pity that other than that future sister-in-law of mine, he never has any regard to these girls."

"Who is that future sister-in-law of yours?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Beef Soup said, "It's the woman you were together with just now."

Lu Xiaofeng was stunned. It was a long time later that he could not bear not to ask, "Are they engaged?"

Beef Soup nodded and said, "Can you guess what kind of place my Gege [older brother] rescued her from?"

Lu Xiaofeng was unwilling to guess.

Beef Soup said, "From a shameful *****house."

She sighed softly before continuing, "At that time she was sold into the brothel by her own Gege; if not for my Gege, I don't know what condition

she would be wasted into."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt sick in his stomach and almost could not stop himself from vomiting.

Beef Soup continued, "My Gege is that good to her, she ought to at least show a bit of appreciation; who would have thought that she always make my Gege the recipient of her anger. A man like my Gege, unexpectedly he loves a woman like her, don't you think it's strange?"

"Not strange," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Beef Soup stared at him with eyes opened wide.

Lu Xiaofeng coldly said, "She is a lovely woman, at least she won't speak ill about anybody behind their back."

Beef Soup sighed, and then she said, "Turns out you also like her. This is a bit of a problem. I originally thought you were determined to go home; therefore, I secretly found a boat for you."

"What are you talking about?" Lu Xiaofeng cried out.

Beef Soup flatly said, "Now since you like her, it's only natural that you would want to stay here; what else can I say?"

She slowly stood up, and to his surprise, started to walk away.

Lu Xiaofeng grabbed her hand and said, "You ... you really found me a boat?"

Beef Soup said, "It's not much of a boat, no big deal, it's just that ..."

"It's just what?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Beef Soup said, "It's just that people like you, even if there are twenty or thirty of you, the boat will still be able to take all of you home."

"Where is the boat?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Beef Soup said, "Since you don't want to leave, why must you ask?"

"I ..." Lu Xiaofeng said.

Beef Soup said, "Since you like her, why must you go?"

She flung Lu Xiaofeng's hand and said coldly, "But I must go, otherwise, when other comes back and sees us, she will drink vinegar."

Lu Xiaofeng felt his mouth was both sour and bitter; watching her walking out of the door, he could not help rushing forward to grab her hand again.

With a straight face Beef Soup said, "As a grown man, if you want to stay then stay, if you want to leave then leave. Why do you take my hand

inappropriately like this?"

"Alright," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I'll come with you!"

As soon as he said that, when he looked up, he saw Sha Man outside the door, looking at him.

The night was deep, the silhouette of the flowers looked blurry. Sha Man was calmly standing in the middle of a cluster of flowers. Her pale face looked so white that it was almost transparent. Her beautiful eyes were brimming with sorrow.

By the time Lu Xiaofeng saw her, she already looked down as she slipped into her own room by their side. She did not cast even a single glance toward Lu Xiaofeng.

She did not speak, not even a single word. What could Lu Xiaofeng say?

Beef Soup looked at them; she said, "Since you want to leave, why haven't you left?"

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly rushed over, pulled Sha Man's hand, and cried out, "Leave, let us go together!"

Sha Man had her back toward Lu Xiaofeng, she did not turn her head, but he could feel that her body was trembling. Suddenly she said coldly, "Go, quickly go, I ... I am getting married tomorrow, I must not see you anyway."

Lu Xiaofeng's hand suddenly felt icy-cold. It was a long time before he slowly let go of her hand. Suddenly he laughed aloud and said, "This is a happy occasion. Congratulations. Too bad I cannot drink your celebratory wine."

He fished out all the banknotes from his pocket and put it on the table. "This is a mere trifle, just consider it my wedding gift to you."

"Thank you," Sha Man said.

Thank you! Wonderful, just wonderful.

A man was just willing to give everything to you, and now, because you gave her congratulatory gift on her wedding, she thanked you. Yet the gift that you gave her happened to be the thing that normally she did not have any regard. Won't you say that this is just wonderful? So wonderful that it would make you feel like banging your head to kill yourself?

But Lu Xiaofeng did not bang his head and died. He followed Beef Soup to the seaside.

This time indeed Beef Soup did not lie to him. Sure enough, there was a boat by the sea, and there were six, seven boatmen on the boat.

Beef Soup pulled his hand and said, "Do you know why I let you go?"

"I don't know," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Actually, I did not want to let you go," Beef Soup said, "But now I cannot not let you go."

"I know," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Do you really?" Beef Soup asked, "Or you still don't know?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I know, but I don't know."

Beef Soup sighed. She said, "I should have known."

"What did you know?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Beef Soup said, "I know that in your heart you must be grieving, but if you stayed here, inevitably there will be a day that you die under my Ninth Brother's hands."

"I know," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Beef Soup said, "When you are home, please find a way to reward these boatmen; they are very reliable."

"I know," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Beef Soup said, "If the old man knew that I let you go, he would be

angry; perhaps he would bury me alive. But ..."

She sighed, and then continued, "But on the whole you and I have a period of deep affection. If it were me who killed you, I can't bring myself to do it. If it was other people who killed you, I will certainly be very grieved."

"I know," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Beef Soup chuckled and said, "Now you seem to know everything."

"Actually, I don't know anything," Lu Xiaofeng said.

He really did not know anything. Because his heart was in a mess, a complete mess.

He was intelligent, a free spirit, brave, staunch, and decisive. He loved life, he loved adventure. He was not a scoundrel like a lot of people think. But he had one great weakness.

His heart was too soft.

Why is it that the stronger the character a man has, the weaker he is?

Why is it that the smarter a man is, the easier it is for him to do something stupid?

And now finally Lu Xiaofeng was at the sea.

The vast, spectacular ocean is always able to make a man forget all his sorrows.

But Lu Xiaofeng has not forgotten.

Right now it was the time when the night was deepest, dawn was just around the corner, but his mind wandered to the previous dusk.

The dusk that he would never forget.

Why would she do that to him? Why was it that at first she wanted him to leave, and then she did not want him to leave, finally she let him leave?

Is one's emotion really that easy to change?

If the fact cannot be trusted, is there anything on earth that a man can put his trust in?

To be able to go home, of course, it was an irresistible temptation.

When he was back, he would be the world-famous Lu Xiaofeng again. On this barren island, he was considered a nobody.

When he was back, he would receive the welcome of many, many people. Those people who did not want to open their wine bottle for

others, they would open it for him. Matters that were impossible for other people to accomplish, he could accomplish.

But if he went back, would he really be happy?

For the last several years, his glory was already too much; anybody who mentioned the Four-Eyebrowed Lu Xiaofeng would mention it with admiration, with envy, but also with jealousy.

Whether he was really happy or not, only he alone knew.

If one cannot be together with the one he really love, even if all the honor, glory wealth in all the earth was given to him, when the night was deep and the dream returned, inevitably it would turn into the time when sleep failed, the time when tears would flow.

Even though he might not have any tears in his eyes, he could shed tears in his heart.

If one can be together with the one he really love, even if he lived in a crowded room, it would feel better than a vast, thousand-acre mansion.

This kind of feeling is definitely not one that smart people would understand.

If you talk to a smart person about this kind of feeling, he would definitely laugh at you, calling you an idiot, an *****; why would you want to give up everything for a girl?

Because they did not know that sometimes a girl was everything a man has.

Even if all the treasure, all the wealth, all the power and and all the honor on the earth was given to him, it can't compare to true happiness.

This kind of feeling, only a genuine, sincere, and true to himself, man could understand.

As long as he could understand, it did not matter if others insulted and sneered at him, saying that was an idiot, an *****; he would simply ignore them.

Lu Xiaofeng was exactly this kind of idiot.

Lu Xiaofeng was exactly this kind of *****.

The night bleak and hazy, the ocean was boundless, yet 'splash!' he suddenly jumped into the sea.

No matter what, he simply must go back and see her one more time. Even if after seeing her he had to quietly leave again, he would be most willing.

Even if he could not leave again, he would be most willing.

A man who was not stupid at all, a wanderer without root, a calm and

cool-headed chivalrous man, a man who squandered money like dirt, a playboy who despise worldly conventions, a man who had already obtained the wealth, reputation, power and success that other people could only dream about, why would he do such thing?

Because he was Lu Xiaofeng.

If he did not do such thing, he would not be Lu Xiaofeng.

He would be a dead man!

The seawater was icy-cold.

After jumping from the boat, he swam for quite a distance before remembering one thing, a terrible thing.

When the boat set sail, it was deep into the night. Right now it was almost dawn, the boat has been sailing for at least two hours or so. If he wanted to swim back, who knows how long he has to swim? Perhaps six or ten hours; but perhaps even if he swam forever, he might never come back.

If he turned around and tried to catch the boat, he might overtake it soon, or he might never catch it.

He suddenly found that he was hanging between the heaven and the earth, going forward would be terrible, going back would be horrible.

Right this moment, he heard a loud 'Boom!'. When he looked back, he saw a green-blue flame was rising from the direction of the boat, blazing flame suddenly filled the sky.

The seawater was icy-cold, but he felt his body was even colder than the seawater. He could only see the boat slowly sank into the water.

If he were still on the boat, perhaps he had been blown into flying ash. This time he went through another narrow escape.

It's just too bad his situation right now was not much better. If he wanted to go back to the island, it would be as difficult as ascending the heavens. But if he wanted to sink into the bottom of the sea, it would be much more easier.

Based on his current situation, it looked like sooner or later he would sink into the bottom of the sea.

The boat he rode on also looked like sooner or later it would sink into the bottom of the sea.

Beef Soup's method was clearly very crude, much more crude than her father's.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. Suddenly he felt that he had another weakness. He was always too easy to trust others, always considered others too good and honest, always did not believe that in this earth there was no such thing as truly evil person beyond cure. He had forgotten that a father would, of course, understand his own daughter better than anybody else.

He thought that Beef Soup would be perfectly satisfied by driving him away, it had not occurred to him that she was determined to kill him.

The long night was over, a streak of sunshine appeared on the eastern horizon, its golden light painted ten thousand ripples of waves; it was an enchanting and magnificent sight.

Could he still see the sun tomorrow? Lu Xiaofeng himself did not have the slightest confidence.

He relaxed his four limbs as much as possible, floating along the sea current half floating, half sinking; he was hoping that the tide would bring him back to the island. At this point he did not even dream that there would be any boat passing through here.

Who would have thought that there was indeed a boat on the surface of the ocean? It was just like the last time he fell into the sea, Yue Yang tossed him that life-saving skiff. On the skiff someone was rowing hard; obviously that person has never imagined that there was a living, breathing human being in the water.

All of a sudden Lu Xiaofeng jumped out of the water and into the skiff. The person was so startled that he screamed, as if he had just seen a ghost.

He seemed to be only a child, naturally his courage was not too big. He wore black clothing and his hair was tied under a dark green turban. He was none other than the little servant who did odd jobs on the boat.

When he went on board, Lu Xiaofeng had already felt that this little servant was kind of sneaky, his appearance seemed a bit familiar. It's just that at that time Lu Xiaofeng himself was a bit out of his wits that basically he did not pay close attention to this kind of matter.

The little servant's face was fair and clear, a bit delicate even, not at all like someone who was accustomed to rough work. When the boat sank, unexpectedly he was still able to get onto the lifeboat. His luck was indeed not bad.

The little servant was so shocked to see Lu Xiaofeng, his lips turned white as he said, "You ... you didn't die?"

"I am already dead," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I am looking for the guy who killed me."

Half-believing, half-doubting, still afraid in his heart, the little servant said, "Why are you looking for me?"

"Because you are the one who sank that boat," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Immediately the little servant denied in loud voice, "It wasn't me, I don't know anything."

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled; suddenly he rushed forward and grabbed the little servant, and pulled the lapel of his gown, exposing sparkling and translucent, fair and delicate chest, a pair of tiny, budding breasts. Unexpectedly, this child was Xiao Yu, who the previous night invited Sha

Man on behalf of the Ninth Young Master.

Naturally she was no longer a child, but a teenager whose amorous feeling had just been awakened. Suddenly a strong, grownup man undid her clothes and had her in his arms, her entire body went weak. In her heart she was scared, angered, but was also shy, and anxious. In a trembling voice she said, "You ... you ... what do you want?"

"I don't want anything," Lu Xiaofeng drawled, "But I have always been known as a famous wolf [i.e. lecher]. Everybody knows that."

Xiao Yu was so scared that she almost pass out, yet there was also an unspeakably weird feeling in her heart that she did not pass out.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "My favorite is little miss who loves to tell lies. I don't know if you can tell lies or not."

He deliberately squinted and grinned wickedly, putting up his best big wolf face, as if he wanted to swallow her whole in one bite.

Instantly Xiao Yu shook her head. "I can't tell lies," she said, "I have never told lies."

"You really cannot tell lies?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Alright, let me test you. I ask you: how could the boat catch fire?"

Xiao Yu looked at his hands, his hands did not look like the kind of hands that follow compass and set square; his expression really made other people's skin crawl. In the end she let out a sigh and said, "At the

bottom of the hold, there were barrels of Jiangnan Pi Li Tang's [lit. hall of thunderbolt] gunpowder, there were also several barrels of black oil. As soon as the gunpowder's fuse was lighted, the ship started to burn."

"And who lighted the fuse?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Yu said, "It was not ..."

"It was not you?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

His hands suddenly did some scary things. Xiao Yu's body turned even softer. "Not someone else," she whispered.

Lu Xiaofeng did not seem to quite understand. "Not someone else?" he said, "Are you saying that it was you?"

Xiao Yu bit her lips. Finally she nodded.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Who told you to do such thing? Was it your Ninth Young Master?"

"Not him," Xiao Yu replied, "It was the Princess [公主]."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Her old man is not the Emperor, why do you call her the Princess?"

Xiao Yu said, "Not Princess [公主], but Gong Zhu [宮主], the 'Gong' of

Huang Gong [皇宫, imperial palace][1].”

“Why is she called ‘Gong Zhu’?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Yu replied, “Because her surname is actually Gong, and her name is Gong Zhu.”

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. “Previously, I also know a little old man [orig. xiao laotou 小老头, lit. ‘little old head’],” he said, “Can you guess his name?”

“What was his name?” Xiao Yu asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, “His name is Lao Touzi, because his original surname is Lao [old], and his name is Touzi [man, boss, gang leader; together 老头子 (Laotouzi) means ‘old man’ (usually in vulgar/derogatory way)].”

[1] The word Gong Zhu [宫主] literally means ‘master [主] of the palace [宫], or ‘imperial empress, milady’; however, so far, everybody has always called her Gongzhu [公主, Princess (usually of royal household)].

Chapter 10 – Aware of imminent death

Xiao Yu laughed. She seemed to forget that pair of scary hands already.

But Lu Xiaofeng let her go. With a deliberate straight face he said, "Indeed you cannot tell lies. I don't like you."

Xiao Yu looked at him; she rolled her eyes, and suddenly said, "You think I was really scared that you might like me?"

"You aren't scared?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Yu shook her head; she said unhurriedly, "I told you all those things, it was because I can't tell lies to begin with."

Lu Xiaofeng guffawed.

The sun had just risen, illuminating her apple-like face, it also illuminated her nicely budding breasts.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "Whether you are telling the truth or not, you'd better put on your clothes now."

Xiao Yu blinked. She said, "You have looked at me anyway, why should I put on my clothes?"

She untied the dark green turban on her head, letting her jet-black, soft

and shiny long hair fell loose. Turning toward the sun, she said, "I have never basked in the sun here, I really want to strip naked and have a full-body sunbathing."

The sun was shining bright, the sea was deep blue; to be able to strip naked and bathing in the sun was a delightful thing indeed. But Lu Xiaofeng cried out, "You must not do that!"

"Why?" Xiao Yu asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Because ... because I am a wolf [i.e. lecher]."

Xiao Yu said, "I am not afraid of wolf, could it be that the wolf is afraid of me?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "The wolf is not afraid of you, but the wolf is afraid that he himself might ..."

He has not finished this sentence when suddenly his countenance changed, because he suddenly discovered that water has entered the bottom of the boat.

"Can you swim?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I can't," Xiao Yu replied.

"This time it looks like we are finished," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"What do you mean finished?" Xiao Yu asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "That Gong Zhu [see Chapter 9] of yours, not only she wanted to kill me, she wanted to kill you to close your mouth as well."

"I know," Xiao Yu drily said.

"You do?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Yu said, "She bored two holes at the bottom of this boat and sealed them with wax. Soaked in seawater, the wax dissolves, seawater bubbling up, then this boat will sink."

Lu Xiaofeng cried out; he said, "Since you already knew it, why do you still want to ride on this boat?"

Xiao Yu said, "Because I have been wondering for a long time, how does it feel to drown in the sea?"

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbstruck. He had never imagined that this little girl, who appeared very clever and quick-witted, was actually a muddle-headed little 'muddled egg'.

Xiao Yu said, "I know that in your heart right now you are cursing me as little 'muddled egg'. Actually, if you did not meet me, you would still be drowning in the sea. And now you have someone to accompany you; what's not good about it?"

With a wry smile Lu Xiaofeng said, "I just have a little regret."

"What is it?" Xiao Yu asked.

"I regret that just now I did not like you for real," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Xiao Yu blushed; but she could not help giggling.

Lu Xiaofeng stared at her. "What are you laughing at?"

Xiao Yu did not answer. She fished out a large lump of yellow wax from a board on the bow, and cut it into two-halves, kneaded the wax until it turned soft, and used it to plug the holes at the bottom of the boat. "When this wax dissolves, what are we going to do?" she muttered to herself.

"I don't know," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I know," Xiao Yu said, "I have prepared seventeen, eighteen pieces of wax like this."

Lu Xiaofeng was pleasantly surprised. "Turns out you are not a little 'muddled egg', but a little fox," he said.

Xiao Yu made an exaggerated sigh and said, "Although I want to know what it feels like to drown in the sea, but I have never had anybody like me; if I die without rhyme or reason, don't you think I'd die in vain?"

Lu Xiaofeng roared in laughter and said, "If that Gong Zhu of yours see you back alive and well, I wonder if she will be scared to death?"

"She won't," Xiao Yu said.

"How do you know that she won't?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Yu said, "Because each time she sends me to do something for her, she always tries to kill me to shut my mouth; too bad each time I did not die. Each time she sees me back alive and well, she seems to be very happy instead, because she knows that she can send me to do something else for her."

"Since you knew that she always tries to kill you, why do you keep doing things for her?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Yu sighed. "Because if I don't," she said, "I will die for real very quickly."

Lu Xiaofeng also could not help sighing. To be together with that Honeybee, it was really not easy to keep on living. He knew that when he was back on the island, the Honeybee would definitely come after him. He can't even think of a place to hide.

Xiao Yu stared at him. Suddenly she said, "You are a good man."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "Finally; your vision is indeed not bad," he said.

Xiao Yu said, "Although your two strips of moustache that look like your eyebrows are a bit annoying, but all in all you cannot be considered ugly."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "When you grow up a bit, I can't say for sure, but you might like my moustache."

Xiao Yu sighed again. She said, "Too bad you are Lu Xiaofeng."

"What's so bad about me being Lu Xiaofeng?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Yu said, "If you are not Lu Xiaofeng, I will definitely marry you. Even becoming your little concubine, I don't care."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "So I am Lu Xiaofeng, why can't you marry me?"

"Because I don't want to be a widow," Xiao Yu said.

"Marrying Lu Xiaofeng becomes a widow?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Yu sighed and said, "That Gong Zhu of mine is intent on taking your life, Ninth Young Master also does not necessarily want you to keep on living. If I married you, perhaps not even three days I would already become a widow."

Noon.

The skiff finally reached the shore. The two of them were so tired that

their muscles were weary and their strength exhausted; they lay down on the beach like dead people.

Nobody knows how much time has passed. Suddenly Xiao Yu said, "Being a widow seems to be fun."

"It's not fun," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Not fun at all."

"It's fun," Xiao Yu insisted, "It must be very fun."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Yu said, "Sooner or later a woman must get married. After she got married she'll have a husband. But a widow does not. If one can live a free and easy life, with nobody to mind her business, and she can even steal someone else's husband, won't that be very fun?"

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbstruck again. In all honesty he has never imagined that this little girl could have this kind of thought. That being a widow was very fun, this was the first time he had ever heard such concept.

"Why don't you say anything?" Xiao Yu asked, "Don't you think what I said makes a lot of sense?"

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "Turns out not only you are a little fox, you are a little 'muddled egg' as well."

Xiao Yu laughed. "But don't you worry," she said, "This little 'muddled egg' does not wish to marry you, a big 'muddled egg'."

She sprang up and said, "I want to go home, what about you?"

"I ..." Lu Xiaofeng said. He was unable to continue, because he really did not know where to go.

He was not afraid that someone would harm him, he was used to this kind of thing long ago. But today was the day Sha Man got married. To have him watch Sha Man was married to another man, he really cannot bear it.

Wave after wave came crashing onto the beach; he suddenly realized that this was the beach he first landed on this island.

Xiao Yu asked, "Are you going to come with me or not?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I have a very nice house around here, do you want to see?"

"You are lying," Xiao Yu said, "I don't like men who lie."

"I also have a friend waiting for me in that house," Lu Xiaofeng said, "His belly is big, not only he is very fun, he never tell lies either."

Xiao Yu doubled over in laughter. She said, "Turns out not only you can tell lies, you can toot your horn really loud as well. There are all kinds of

men in the world, but men who don't lie, I have never seen any."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "If you don't believe me, why not see for yourself?"

"Alright," Xiao Yu said, "Going is going, what's the big deal? Besides ..."
She puckered her lips and laughed, and then continued, "Besides, I am not afraid of you, it is you who are scared of me."

The spring was still bubbling with fresh water, his straw hut was still standing unharmed like before. There are actually a lot of things on this earth that is never going to change.

Xiao Yu doubled over in laughter again. "Is this your very nice house?" she asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "This house is pleasantly cool and airy. Tell me, which part of it is not nice?"

"Very ... very ... very shameful," Xiao Yu said.

Lu Xiaofeng guffawed. He pulled Xiao Yu's hand and took her inside. The big-bellied Buddha Maitreya was still lying on its place, his mouth was still smiling wide.

"And this must be your friend?" Xiao Yu asked.

"You think he can tell lies?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"He can't," Xiao Yu replied.

"Therefore, I did not lie to you," Lu Xiaofeng said. Stooping down, he patted the Buddha Maitreya's belly, and said with a laugh, "Good friend, I knew that you will definitely wait for me here. Not only you can't tell lies, you won't sell out your friend either."

The Buddha Maitreya looked at him with a grin; suddenly he said, "But I can bite."

The sound was coming from the Buddha Maitreya's mouth. Lu Xiaofeng was really shocked. Since when can this Buddha Maitreya speak?

The Buddha Maitreya suddenly sighed and said, "Not only I can bite, I can also tell lies."

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng jumped up, he grabbed the Buddha Maitreya and lifted him up. He was jumping up and down and laughing at the same time.

Xiao Yu looked at him in shock; she thought he was sick.

Lu Xiaofeng was indeed sick, the disease of happiness. Of course Buddha Maitreya cannot talk, but the person hiding inside him can. Lu Xiaofeng could hear this person's voice clearly.

This person was Sha Man.

Sha Man's face was still pale. Although she appeared more haggard than before, her eyes were shining with joy.

Lu Xiaofeng stared blankly at her. Nobody knew for how long. Finally he said, "How can you be here?"

Sha Man winked. She said, "You can come to my house, why can't I come to your house?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "Of course you can come; you can come any time, it's just that ..."

He suddenly felt sick in his stomach again. "Today you are not supposed to be here," he continued.

"Why?" Sha Man asked.

Lu Xiaofeng wanted to force a laugh, but he simply could not laugh. "Isn't today the day you are getting married?" he asked.

Sha Man chuckled. "Didn't I just tell you?" she said, "Not only I can bite, I can also tell lies."

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbstruck.

Xiao Yu could not resist from interrupting, "Now I understand why you like a girl who can tell lies, it is because you like Miss Man." She winked, and then continued, "And now the two of you can really like each other,

but I have to go. Otherwise, I am afraid you might catch up with me."

This little girl was very tactful. As soon as she said she wanted to leave, she just left. Of course this time Lu Xiaofeng did not try to hold her back.

When Xiao Yu was out of their sight, Sha Man asked, "The two of us can really like each other; what did she mean by that?"

Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Exactly like this." And then he suddenly pounced forward, wrapped his arms around her, and the two of them rolled around on the soft leaves.

The sea breeze was warm and moist, the waves gently lapped the beach, gentle and tender, just like a lover's breath.

But their breathing was not as gentle and tender as the sea breeze. Their breathing was short, and rapid. Just like the beating of their hearts.

-- Why did you lie? Why did you kick me out?

-- Because I wanted to test you, but I knew that you would come back.

These questions, they did not need to ask, neither did they need to answer. There was no need to explain anything.

What they were doing right now was the best explanation. In the deepest part of the hearts of two people who loved each other, there has never been any explanation better than this.

The sea breeze was still as gentle as before, their breathing has become as gentle and tender as the sea breeze. This tiny thatched hut was their palace. In their palace, there was only peace, only love. All the cruel, evil things in the world, seemed to be very distant, very far away from them.

But they were wrong. Just then, their palace – the Palace of Love, suddenly collapsed; the roof fell on top of their bodies.

Lu Xiaofeng did not move. Sha Man did not move either. They were still embracing each other tightly, as if even the sky fell down on them, crushing them, they did not care. Because they have found the one thing that their hearts desired the most – real passion, real love.

They have satisfied the other's desire. They did not even seem to hear the voice outside.

Actually, it was not that they did not hear it, but they did not wish to hear. It was the voice that they did not wish to hear the most. Because for them, there was nothing more unpleasant to hear than the sound of Beef Soup's laughter.

The sound from the outside right now was exactly the sound of Beef Soup's cold laughter.

Not only Beef Soup was sneering, she was also talking. The thing that she said was even sharper, even more ear-piercing, than the sound of her cold laughter. Not only that, she even clapped her hands!

"Wonderful! Marvelous! If your martial art skills are half as good as

what you have just done, absolutely nobody would be able to stand."

Finally Lu Xiaofeng sighed; with one hand he pushed aside the straw roof on top of their bodies.

Beef Soup was standing above their heads, looking at him. Her eyes were brimming with hatred and jealousy.

"How are you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked. [Translator's note: in Chinese 'how are you?' is 'ni hao' – are you well?]

"I am not good," Beef Soup replied.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "Now that's a true statement, you are indeed not a good person."

Beef Soup's cold laugh suddenly turned into an enchanting smile. "I just want an honest answer from you."

"What is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Beef Soup said, "In this kind of thing, am I better, or is she better?"

"The two of you cannot be compared," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Why?" Beef Soup asked.

"Because there are two ways to do this kind of thing," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Which two?" Beef soup asked.

Lu Xiaofeng replied, "One is as human, the other is as beasts."

Beef Soup's enchanting smile turned into a cold laugh. "And if the human died after that?" she said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I remember someone said that ten thousand dead people can't be compared to one live b1tch."

"It must be a very smart person who said that," Beef Soup said.

"Whether you are a human or a b1tch, maybe I am not too clear myself," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I only know one thing."

"What is it?" Beef Soup asked.

"That we are still alive, at least right now we are still alive," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"For how much longer?" Beef Soup asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "As long as we can live one day, it will be better than you living for ten thousand years."

"You are wrong," Beef Soup said.

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Beef Soup said, "Perhaps the two of you can still live a day and a half."

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Beef Soup said, "This is a very big island."

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Beef Soup said, "In our estimate, there are at least 5,700 places where you can hide yourself."

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Beef Soup said, "As long as you can hide for 18 sichen [36 hours], then you might be able to live for 180 years." With a cold laugh she added, "Too bad that you won't be able to hide."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Beef Soup said, "Because the two of you are already considered two ants, he will be able to find you and squish you dead within half a sichen [1 hour]."

"Is it he? Or you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"He," Beef Soup replied.

"And by 'he' you mean your Ninth Brother?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Certainly is," Beef Soup replied.

Her eyes were brimming with conceit, "He is even willing to give you half a sichen advantage," she said.

"How?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Beef Soup said, "Starting from now, in half a sichen he will absolutely not run after you."

"Absolutely not?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Beef Soup said, "Whatever he says, each word is like a nail on the wall, one nail one small hole."

"I believe you," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Beef Soup said, "Even if you don't, at least the person who has just slept by your side should believe."

Suddenly her voice became very gentle and soft, "Because I seem to remember she has also slept by my Ninth Brother's side."

Lu Xiaofeng was not offended at all.

If there is complete trust between two people who have real feeling and real love to each other, there is nothing in the world worth their feeling offended.

But if you said that Lu Xiaofeng was not mad at all, that is also not a true statement. At least his countenance has changed somewhat.

Beef Soup was laughing. Lu Xiaofeng said, "Is that all you wanted to tell me?"

Beef Soup nodded. Lu Xiaofeng said, "And now I have heard it all."

"Have you heard every word clearly?" Beef Soup asked.

"Every word," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Do you want to bet with me?" Beef Soup asked.

"Bet what?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I want to bet that in less than three sichen [6 hours], Ninth Brother will be able to find you," Beef Soup said.

"And then he'll squish me dead like squishing an ant?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Exactly right," Beef Soup replied.

The sea breeze was as gentle as before, their breathing was just as gentle, but their mood was totally different.

Gong Jiu's ['jiu' means nine] sword, Gong Jiu's method of killing people, naturally Sha Man knew a lot better than Lu Xiaofeng.

But right now, the matter she had in mind was nothing to do with Gong Jiu.

She was thinking about what Beef Soup was saying a moment ago.

-- In this kind of thing, am I better, or is she better?

Up to this moment, unexpectedly she was still drinking vinegar [i.e. jealous].

Actually, it was not surprising at all.

No matter when, if you want a woman's life, it is not a difficult matter at all, but if you want a woman not to drink vinegar, then you can simply keep on dreaming.

Chapter 11 – Eluding pursuit

Lu Xiaofeng also had a worry of his own. But what he was thinking was not Gong Jiu's sword either.

A matter of life and death, he had always been less concerned about. He should have been dead many times before.

Sha Man suddenly asked, "What are you thinking about?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I am thinking about you."

"Me?" Sha Man asked.

"I am wondering if you are jealous," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Sha Man bit her lips, "Why would I be jealous?" she asked.

"Because you have reason to be jealous," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Because you have had a good time with her?" Sha Man asked.

"I have had good time with a lot of girls," Lu Xiaofeng said, "She was nothing more than one of them, and you ..." He deliberately paused.

Sha Man instantly continued for him, "I was also only one of them."

Although Lu Xiaofeng did not utter a single word of admission, he did not offer the least bit of rejection either.

Sha Man looked at him; she stared at him for a long time. "Why didn't you ask me whether I really slept with Gong Jiu or not?" she suddenly asked.

"I don't need to ask," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Because basically you don't care about it," Sha Man said.

Not only Lu Xiaofeng did not deny, unexpectedly he even nodded.

Again Sha Man stared at him for a long time. Finally she sighed softly and said, "If you still think that I don't understand your intention, then you are wrong."

"What's my intention?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Sha Man said, "You intentionally want to make me angry so I'll leave."

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Sha Man said, "You think that if I leave you, I'll be able to live for a hundred and eighty years?"

This time, Lu Xiaofeng neither deny nor confirm.

"Too bad you have forgotten a little something," Sha Man said.

He did not ask at all, she already continued on, "For a woman, even if she could really live for 180 years, there is not much meaning in life."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "At least it's bit better than to only have 18 sichen to live."

"That's what you think," Sha Man said.

"What do you think?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Sha Man said, "As long as I can be with you, even living for one sichen I will be perfectly contented!"

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly sprang up, pulled her hand, and said, "Let's go."

Beyond the flat sandy beach, there was lofty and rugged rock, followed by deep jungle with lush trees and bushes. In a place like this, it would be easy even for a rabbit to evade the fox's pursuit.

Lu Xiaofeng was not a rabbit. But not only he had rabbit's instinct and speed, he also had the cunning of a fox and the loyalty and bravery of a dog.

Himself was a hunter, his survival skill in jungles and marshes was far superior than anyone could understand. As long as he could find a piece of twig, he was able to manufacture a deadly booby-trap in a very short period of time.

On this kind of place, if he wanted to evade one man's pursuit, it should not be a very difficult thing to do.

"But that man is not a human," Sha Man naturally was talking about Gong Jiu. "He is a viper, a fox, a devil."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "What exactly is he?" he asked.

Sha Man said, "Some say he is made of nine different things."

"Which nine?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Sha Man said, "The viper's spit, the fox's heart, the ice and snow of the north sea, the rock of Tianshan [Mt. Tian, between Xinjiang and Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan], the bravery and fierceness of a lion, the viciousness of jackal and wolf, the patience of a camel, and the intelligence of a human, plus the spirit of the eighteenth level of hell's ghost."

Although Lu Xiaofeng was laughing, anybody could see that his laugh was not a joyful one.

Sha Man said, "On this island, there are indeed a lot of places one can hide."

"How many do you know?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Sha Man said, "Although what I know is no more than around five thousand places, it cannot be considered too few."

"How many does he know?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"He knows all of them," Sha Man said.

-- What I know, he also knows; those that I don't know, he still knows.

Sha Man continued, "Therefore, it doesn't matter where we hide, he will definitely find us."

Lu Xiaofeng was silent for a moment. Suddenly he laughed again.

Sha Man was not surprised; she knew that there are people in the world that are able to laugh in any circumstances. She liked this kind of people, but in all honesty she thought that Lu Xiaofeng's laugh was too happy. She could not help but ask, "What are you laughing at?"

"I just remembered something funny," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"In our situation right now, what can possibly make you think of funny thing?" Sha Man asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "We can hide in a very amusing place."

Sha Man said, "No matter how amusing that place is, if he can find it, it will become very boring."

"I guarantee that he won't find that place," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Where is it?" Sha Man asked.

"Inside the egg shell," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Sha Man was a bit angry. At a time like this, he really shouldn't crack a joke like that.

Not only Lu Xiaofeng was laughing, his eyes were shining. Sha Man could not bear not to say, "Only an egg would hide inside the egg shell, only you are a muddled egg."

"You are forgetting something," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Oh?" Sha Man said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Only an egg will have egg shell."

Sha Man did not understand.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Do you know the biggest muddled egg around

here?"

"It's not you?" Sha Man asked.

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head. "I can't be compared to him," he said, "At most I am only made of six or seven different things."

"Are you talking about Gong Jiu?" Sha Man asked.

"Correct," Lu Xiaofeng said, and then he added, "Exactly because he is the biggest muddled egg that whoever is able to hide inside his shell will be very safe."

[Translator's note: the word I translated as 'muddled egg' 混蛋 means 'b@stard/son of a b1tch/jerk, etc.' But if I translated it, the exchange above would not make any sense. Besides, I feel that the word 'muddled egg' is very amusing ...]

Sha Man's eyes also shone. Finally she was able to understand Lu Xiaofeng's idea.

-- Since Gong Jiu was going out to hunt and capture them, his own house must be empty.

If they could hide inside Gong Jiu's house, it would be a very safe place. Because nobody would even dream that they were hiding there; nobody, including Gong Jiu himself.

Naturally the place where no one could think about was the safest place.

Sha Man said, "Now only one question remains: how can we get in?"

Naturally Lu Xiaofeng also knew that it was the biggest question, but he was confident that they would find a way.

In his eyes, nothing is absolutely impossible in the world.

Sha Man said, "Do you already have the answer to this question?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Naturally you know where that egg shell is?"

"Ehm," Sha Man said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "In that case, the question is already answered.

Sha Man said, "Do you think we can just swagger it, and hope that nobody would see us?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "We do not need to swagger in, we practically do not need to even take a single step."

"We don't need to take a single step?" Sha Man said, "Are you telling me that you turn into a housefly and fly in?"

"I cannot change," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Even if I can, I won't change into a housefly."

He laughed again. "The flight of a housefly is too tiresome," he said, "I am thinking of sneaking in comfort and ease."

Sha Man opened her eyes wide, staring at him just like a child who had just listened to a fairy tale.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "I know that in your heart you don't believe me, but I guarantee that you don't need to worry the least bit over this question."

"Are you telling me that there is something worth worrying?" Sha Man said.

"There is one," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Tell me," Sha Man said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I only have a way to hide in, I don't have any way to get out."

"Hence even though we can hide for 18 sichen, he will still be able to find us," Sha Man said.

"By that time," Lu Xiaofeng continued, "If he wants to kill us, we ..."

"For that," Sha Man cut him off, "You need not worry."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because," Sha Man replied, "After 18 sichen, he will definitely not be here."

"He has to go?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"He must go," Sha Man said.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because there is something outside waiting for him to attend to," Sha Man replied.

"Other than murder, what else would require his personal attention that he has to go?" Lu Xiaofeng wondered aloud.

"Nothing," Sha Man said.

"This time, who is he going to kill?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Anybody deserving his personal attention, naturally is an extraordinary character," Sha Man said.

"Who is he?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I don't know," Sha Man replied.

Perhaps she really did not know, but perhaps although she did, she was unwilling to tell him. Either way, Lu Xiaofeng did not press. He did not want any woman to betray her former lover for his sake.

Sha Man stared at him. "And now, are you going to turn yourself to something?" she asked.

"What do you think?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"In my opinion," Sha Man said, "Only dead people can hide inside Gong Jiu's room in comfort and ease."

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled. "You forgot something," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Oh?" Sha Man said.

"There are a lot of dead objects," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Not necessarily humans."

Objects without life are dead objects. Trees have life, but if the tree is chopped off, sawed into boards, and made into a chest, then it becomes a dead object. Therefore, a wooden chest is a dead object.

Along a remote, deep, winding mountain path, ten living persons carrying five big wooden chests trudged by. Apparently the chests were

very heavy, everybody was struggling.

Especially the last chest. The two big men carrying this chest were sweating profusely; they were already lagging some ways away. Fortunately, it was already not far from the mouth of the valley.

Right this moment, they saw Sha Man.

Just like a gust of wind, she suddenly appeared, blocking their way. "Do you know me?" she asked.

Of course they did. People who have entered the valley, no matter who, would have stolen a glance toward her direction – at most they only dared to steal two glances on her. Because everybody knew that if the Ninth Young Master ever caught anybody stealing a glance toward her, the Ninth Young Master would be angry.

And nobody dared to provoke the Ninth Young Master to anger.

The two men hung their heads, "What order does Miss Man have?"

"I don't have any," Sha Man said, "But the Ninth Young Master does."

The two men were listening. The Ninth Young Master's order, no one dared not to listen.

Sha Man said, "He sent me here to tell you to bring this chest into his room."

Although the order they received previously was definitely not that, nobody dared to doubt, let alone to defy the order.

Everybody knew that whatever Miss Man said, it was no different than if it were the Ninth Young Master himself!

Sha Man said, "Ninth Young Master likes cleanliness, so you'd better find a place where you could give your hands and feet some washing."

A small stream happened to be nearby, they quickly went over, and as quickly came back. The chest was still lying on the pathway, but Miss Man was gone.

Although she has gone, what she said was still in effect.

It was dark and quiet inside the chest; it had been set down gently.

Outside was full of life and death dangers and crises, yet two persons were in each other's embrace inside the chest. Have you ever wondered how did it feel?

Perhaps very few people in the world knew how it feels; but Lu Xiaofeng definitely knew, and so did Sha Man.

Because right now they were in each other's tight embrace, breathing each other breathe.

By the time they could speak up, Sha Man could not help asking, "How did you know he was going to have some chests delivered inland?"

"I have seen clearly that he is a very meticulous person," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Moreover, he loves to use gifts to buy people's hearts. He had not arrived, the chests had already been delivered; what would happen when he finally arrived?"

Sha Man said, "He arrived yesterday, how did you know the chests would be delivered only today?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "After following him to the sea for many days, those people would quickly be stifled and felt like they were suffocating to death, they would be dying to come ashore. Even if they could not find women, they would be sure to have a good drink. And when they were drunk, they wouldn't be able to crawl up early in the morning."

Sha Man said, "Therefore, you have anticipated that the chests would be delivered only this late in the day?"

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled and said, "Of course I was also relying on my luck."

Sha Man said, "Your luck is pretty good, perhaps it was because you can usually make accurate predictions."

People who are able to make accurate predictions usually do have good luck. Because only people who are able to make accurate predictions can grab the opportunity. And opportunity is equal to good luck.

Sha Man's voice was even gentler, "You even predicted that the men who brought the chest in would not know my affair, and that they would definitely obey my orders?"

Naturally Lu Xiaofeng had already predicted that. In this kind of matter, if Gong Jiu himself did not say anything, who would dare to talk?

A proud and conceited man, if his own woman left him, would he announce it to the world? He would rather have other people think that it was he who abandoned the woman, he would rather have other people think that it was he who had a change of heart.

He would rather die than to let other people know the pain of his suffering and the shame of his disgrace.

Lu Xiaofeng understood this feeling, because he himself was also such a person.

Sha Man asked, "But how did you know that the chest would be delivered here safely, that along the way, no one would even question?"

Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Because I can see that people in here don't like to meddle in other people's business, especially this kind of trivial matter."

Sha Man sighed. "Your opinion is correct," she said, "People in here, no matter what business, everything does have a price."

Since during the delivery of the chest no one asked any question, now that it was here, naturally no one would ask.

Since Gong Jiu was out hunting them, naturally he would not go back to his house.

The chest has been opened only a crack, they were still in each other's tight embrace.

They were not eager to go out at all.

"When I die, if Yan Wangye [King of Hell, from Sanskrit Yama Raja] asks me: what I want to be in the next life?"

"You surely want to be a little chick."

"You got it."

This chest was really a lot like an egg shell. The egg shell was really safe, warm, and happy.

"I believe that when the chicks were still in the egg shell, they wouldn't be anxious to get out."

"Why?"

"Because they knew that as soon as they get out, they would have to

grow into big chicken."

"And usually big chicken soon will turn into crispy fried chicken, braised chicken, or stewed chicken soup."

"I heard only hens can be cooked into stewed chicken soup."

"You want to make me into stewed soup?"

"I can't bear to do that. But you smell much too delicious, much more delicious than crispy fried chicken."

"You want to eat me?"

"I am dying to eat you."

The dusk arrived. Two little chicks finally came out of the egg shell.

One male and one female.

Of course the Ninth Young Master's residence did not look like egg shell at all. It was a magnificent room, with sophisticated and elegant furnishing. The setting sun was shining on the snow-white paper window covering.

"When he is not here, will anybody ever come in?"

"Never."

These past several years, absolutely no one dared to break into the Ninth Young Master's house, not even his old man.

He has always been a reclusive man, so his most precious possession must be a mirror.

"Why?"

"Because the only person he truly likes is himself."

Sure enough, there was a very large mirror in the room. Clearly it was the handicraft of a master artisan, ground from the best bronze material.

"He ground the bronze himself. He considers this as the 'undoubtedly the best mirror in the world'."

Next to the mirror hung a sword. The blade was long and narrow, the shape was old, yet elegant.

"This is his sword."

He was out to kill, but he left his sword behind. He did not need a sword to kill.

Lu Xiaofeng lightly ran his fingertip along the blade of the sword; he

slowly said, "I know only one other person whose swordsmanship has also been trained to 'without sword' realm."

"Ximen Chuixue?" Sha Man said.

"You know him?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Sha Man nonchalantly replied, "All I know is that the 'without sword' realm is not the highest realm of swordsmanship."

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Sha Man said, "Since we are talking about sword training, why bother inventing the two characters, 'without sword'?"

Before Lu Xiaofeng could even open his mouth, they suddenly heard someone clapping under the bed.

The clap was very light, but it was more shocking than a clap of thunder.

Lu Xiaofeng quickly turned around. He saw a bald head sticking out from under the bed.

"Honest Monk!"

Lu Xiaofeng had just called out, a sword's ray flashed, the shiny,

flickering sword has already rested on Honest Monk's neck.

What a fast sword!

The sword hanging by the bronze mirror has left its sheathe and landed in Sha Man's hand. Her move was so fast that even Lu Xiaofeng was startled.

Naturally Honest Monk was even more scared than him, his face turned deathly pale. With a forced laugh he said, "Actually, Miss did not need to make your move, Monk already knew that Miss is the Number One Swordswoman of this age."

"You knew?" Sha Man coldly asked.

Honest Monk said, "Although Monk has never eaten pork, I have at least seen how a pig walks. Just now I heard Miss said those words, I already prostrated myself in utmost admiration."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "Turns out Honest Monk also know how kiss @ss," he said.

Honest Monk said, "Monk did not kiss @ss at all, Monk always speaks the truth."

Sha Man did not laugh; with a straight face she said, "Too bad Miss always dislikes listening to the truth."

"What is it that Miss likes to hear?" Honest Monk asked.

"Miss likes to hear people kissing @ss," Sha Man replied.

Honest Monk winked. He said, "Although Monk cannot kiss @ss, there are many other things that Monk can do."

"Such as?" Sha Man asked.

Honest Monk said, "I can be the matchmaker, I can be the witness when two people decide to get married. Those are things that Monk is most capable of."

"Who is getting married? Who needs a matchmaker?" Sha Man asked.

"It's a couple of little chicks," Honest Monk replied, "One male, one female."

Sha Man laughed.

As soon as she laughed, like a slippery fish Honest Monk slipped out from under her sword, and as soon as he was out, he hid himself behind Lu Xiaofeng's back. "If this little rooster will not marry the little hen, Monk will be the first to raise an objection."

"Who says I won't?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"You are really willing?" Honest Monk asked.

Lu Xiaofeng did not answer him, he only looked at Sha Man quietly.

'Ding!' the sword in Sha Man's hand fell, the two persons suddenly became one.

Honest Monk looked at them. The expression on his face was so weird, it was as if he was about to cry. "Why didn't Monk become a little rooster?" he muttered, "Why did Monk want to become a monk?"

Surprisingly, there was no wine in that house, not even a drop.

Honest Monk sighed and said, "If a man's house does not have any wine in it, can the man still be considered a man?"

"So those who don't drink wine are not men?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk said, "Even if he himself does not drink, he should at least have a little wine to invite other people for a drink."

"So Monk also wants to drink?" Sha Man asked.

"I only want to drink a certain kind of wine," Honest Monk said.

"Which one?" Sha Man asked.

"Your celebratory wine," Honest Monk replied. [Translator's note: orig. 喜酒 (xi jiu), lit. happiness wine, the liquor drunk at wedding feasts.]

Sha Man smiled sweetly. Lu Xiaofeng also chuckled. They suddenly discovered that this monk was really honest, as well as endearing.

Honest Monk said, "Since there is no wine, Monk can swallow my own saliva, it can be considered drinking your celebratory wine."

He really swallowed his saliva before continuing, "And now, since Monk has already drunk your celebratory wine, if you are thinking of not becoming husband and wife, you can't."

Sha Man looked up, she looked at Lu Xiaofeng and said, "Would you say we can or we can't?"

"We can't," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Immediately the two became one.

Honest Monk's turned into that weird expression again, the one that looked like he was about to cry. "If the two of you keep doing that, aren't you forcing the Monk to return to secular life?" he said.

The night was deep.

There was lantern in the house, but it was not lighted, it did not need to be lighted.

Lu Xiaofeng did not care. Sha Man did not care.

-- If there are true feelings, no stars, no moon, it does not matter. Why would no lantern, no flame matter?

Naturally Honest Monk did not care even more. He happened to be in the position where 'what the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over'.

The room was really pitch-black, they could not see anything.

"What are you two doing?" Honest Monk asked.

"Nothing," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Is your mouth free to talk?" Honest Monk asked.

"It is," Sha Man rushed to answer.

"Since you are free," Honest Monk said, "Can you accompany the Monk chatting? Can you talk?"

"We can," Sha Man responded.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "How did Monk hide under the bed?"

Honest Monk said, "Because although the master of this place does not like to drink wine, he loves to drink vinegar [i.e. jealous]."

"Monk is not stupid," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Monk is annoyingly smart," Sha Man said.

"But little chicks are not too smart," Honest Monk said.

"Which part is not too smart?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk said, "Little chicks could have ordered those two idiots to bring the chest back into the boat. Then after less than three to five days, the two chicks can both go home."

Chapter 12 – Monk's magic trick

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbstruck. Sha Man's hands felt icy-cold.

They immediately realized that that was the only chance for them to escape from this place.

A lost opportunity, never to come again.

Honest Monk sighed again and said, "Two little chicks, one bald donkey [derogatory term for Buddhist monk], if all of us die in here, then ..."

He suddenly closed his mouth. Lu Xiaofeng sprang up. Although Sha Man did not move, her heart was pounding; it was pounding really fast.

They heard the sound of footsteps outside the door, like the footsteps of five or six people.

The footsteps were coming toward this room. Soon they could see light penetrating the cracks on the door; the light was getting brighter and brighter.

Lu Xiaofeng flashed toward the chest, lifting the lid, he said in the lowest possible voice, "Hide inside."

Sha Man fled into the chest, and then he himself entered in before gently putting the lid down.

Just then, the door opened.

He heard the sound of the opening door, he also heard footsteps coming in; altogether there were five people.

The first to speak was a woman. Her voice was harsh, "Who told you to bring this chest here?"

Lu Xiaofeng's heart jumped. He could hear clearly that this voice belonged to Xiao Yu.

Xiao Yu herself was not infuriating, but what she said was really infuriating.

"It was Miss Man."

Naturally the man who replied was one of the two men who brought the chest in a moment ago.

"Miss Man?" Xiao Yu laughed coldly, "Are you obeying the Ninth Young Master's order? Or Miss Man's?"

Nobody dared to respond.

"Do you know that Miss Man does not belong to Ninth Young Master anymore?" Xiao Yu's voice was even harsher.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart sank even deeper.

He still did not understand, obviously no one investigated this matter, how did this little girl[1] find out?

This girl has just been through mortal danger and escaped alive, why did she come to meddle in this kind of business?

Lu Xiaofeng really wished he could sew this girl's mouth shut.

"Take it out."

Xiao Yu cried out loudly again, "Quickly take this chest out!"

"Where?"

"From wherever you took it out, take it back to that place."

As soon as she said that, Lu Xiaofeng immediately realized he was wrong.

Such a lovely little mouth, how could he sew it shut? He ought to give this little mouth a little kiss. Even an extra kiss or two was fine, she deserved it.

The chest was brought down from the ship, and in four more hours, the

ship was going to set sail again. If the chest was sent back to the ship, then they would also leave with the ship.

"Then after five days, the two chicks can both go home."

Lu Xiaofeng was so happy that he nearly could not refrain from shouting, "Long live Xiao Yu!"

Only now did he realize that Xiao Yu was doing them a favor. This crafty little rascal must have known early on that they were hiding inside the chest.

His heart was brimming with joy and gratitude; he believed Sha Man must be equally grateful.

He could not help wanting to hold her hand in his.

Although it was very dark inside the chest, he did not care, because even if he touched the wrong place, it did not matter.

And he indeed touched the wrong place. A terribly wrong place; an annoying mistake, a mistake that made him wanted to die.

He touched a bald head.

The person hiding inside the chest with him was not Sha Man, it was Honest Monk!

Lu Xiaofeng really wanted to cry out. Too bad that as soon as his hand touched the bald head, Honest Monk's hand already sealed three of his acupoints; the three major acupoints.

Not only he was unable to shout, he could not even move his finger.

What about Sha Man? Where was Sha Man?

The chest has been lifted up. Xiao Yu did not stop urging, "Quick, quick, quick!"

Lu Xiaofeng was so anxious he felt he was going crazy.

Seeing the chest was being carried away, Sha Man must be going crazy too, but like him, she could only watch helplessly.

Thinking about it, Lu Xiaofeng's heart broke to pieces.

Sha Man's heart must be broken to pieces too.

But what good is a broken heart? Even if he crash his head and die, even if he crush his body to pieces, it was just as useless.

He finally understood the real feeling of the four-word 'have no way out'. The feeling was simply unbearable.

Nobody knew what kind of drug these two men who carried the chest

took, once they lifted the chest, they walked away very fast.

Unexpectedly Honest Monk held Lu Xiaofeng's hand in his, and he lightly patted him, as if Lu Xiaofeng was a little child and Honest Monk was comforting him, telling him to listen nicely.

But Lu Xiaofeng only wanted to listen to one thing: he wanted to hear this monk's bald head cracking open, just like an egg shell being cracked open.

Too bad that not only the two men carrying the chest were walking very fast, they were walking very steady; as if they had been learning how to carry chest since they were in their mother's womb.

Honest monk sighed softly, as if he was very comfortable, and very pleased.

"This monk is indeed fated to be my black star; as soon as I saw him, I knew that sooner or later I would meet some danger."

In term of cursing people, Lu Xiaofeng could not be considered an expert. Of all kinds of cussing words and swearing of seven southern, six northern, thirteen provinces in all, he only knew a little bit; added together, perhaps he only knew about six or seven hundred words.

He had already used up all these six, seven hundred cussing words in his heart, it's just too maddening that he was unable to curse out loud.

-- What about Sha Man?

-- Watching helplessly as she and her little rooster were being separated by other people, how did she feel?

-- Was she going to die?

-- Perhaps dying was better instead, because if she didn't, how would she pass the time alone?

-- Perhaps she would find a way to sneak into the ship; her ability was actually a lot better than what people think.

-- If she could not get on board the ship, would she climb onto other people's bed?

Lu Xiaofeng's heart felt like it was deep-fried in oil, the more he thought, the more painful it was, the more he thought, the more he felt the pain was unbearable.

Originally he was not this kind of narrow-minded person, but meeting with Sha Man has changed him.

When a man found his true love, why is it that he always changed that now he take everything too hard? Now he became narrow-minded?

The two men carrying the chest suddenly opened their mouth in curses.

"Curse this chest! We didn't even have the chance to enjoy a good meal."

"Damn it, it's just like meeting the big headed ghost in person."

"We might as well find a secluded place and throw it into the ocean, lest it creates more trouble for us."

It was only natural that these kind of veteran sailors, who had been through the wind and the waves for a long time, were not people of good moral character; there was a good chance that they would actually do that kind of thing.

But Lu Xiaofeng did not care at all, on the contrary, there was a little part of him that wished that they would really do it.

Who would have thought that these men changed their mind?

"But at least we have to look at the chest to see what the hell is inside."

On second thought, Lu Xiaofeng felt that this idea was not too bad either. Too bad Xiao Yu already put padlock on the chest.

"Can you open this lock?"

"I can't."

"Do you dare to smash the lock open?"

"Why not?"

"If Ninth Young Master asked, who's responsible?"

"You."

"F*ck your mother."

The other man half-laughing half-cursing said, "I always knew you are a b@stard."

"You are more or less the same."

"Therefore, we might as well bring this chest back nicely, dump it in the bottom hold, and then the whole world will be at peace."

'Thud!' the two men unceremoniously dumped the chest on the floor; from the sound of it, underneath was a wooden floor.

The two men heaved a deep sigh together. This place was obviously the bottom hold of Gong Jiu's ship.

Their task accomplished, finally the whole world will be at peace.

Honest Monk also let out a sigh softly, as if saying, "In three, five days, the little rooster and the bald donkey will be home safe and sound."

And so his world will also be at peace.

But what about Lu Xiaofeng?

It seemed like Lu Xiaofeng did not even have any breath left. Putting his hand on his nostrils, Honest Monk indeed felt no breath.

Honest Monk was shocked. "What's going on?" he asked.

No response, no breath. Can a person really die of anger?

"You must not die," Honest Monk said, "Monk does not wish to be stuffed inside the chest with a dead man."

Still no response, still no breath. Yet Honest Monk suddenly burst in laughter, "If you want to deceive me, so that I'll unseal your acupoints, then you are dead wrong."

His laughed with even more glee, "Good people don't live long, bad people last for a thousand years. I know you are not dead yet."

At last Lu Xiaofeng let out a breath. The chest was stuffy to begin with, holding his breath made it even more unpleasant. He did not want to really die of anger.

Honest Monk's laughter was even more cheerful, "Although I have no wish to fight you inside this chest, talking to myself is boring. As long as you promise to be nice, I'll unseal your mute acupoint."

Lu Xiaofeng was very nice.

If someone had his three vital acupoints sealed, even if he did not want to be nice, he could not.

Indeed Honest Monk was a man who kept his words. Immediately he unsealed Lu Xiaofeng's mute acupoint.

"You, bald donkey, why didn't you drop dead immediately?"

It was actually the first thing Lu Xiaofeng wanted to say, but he decided not to.

Sometimes he was also a profound man, he also had deep thoughts, he did not want Honest Monk to seal his mute acupoint at all. Even his voice did not show the least bit of anger.

"Actually, you did not have to do that," he said indifferently.

"Did not have to do what?" Honest Monk asked.

"Did not have to seal my acupoints," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"But Monk was afraid you might get angry," Honest Monk said.

"Why would I be angry?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk said, "Little hen suddenly turned into a bald donkey, inevitably little rooster would be angry."

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed. "You are wrong," he said.

"And I was wrong because ...?" Honest Monk said.

"Long ago the little rooster is not a little rooster anymore," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"What is it then?" Honest Monk asked.

"Old rooster," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"So what's the difference between little rooster and old rooster?" Honest Monk asked.

"There are a lot of differences," Lu Xiaofeng said, "The biggest one is, old rooster has seen no one knows how many hens, big and small, but he has only one bald donkey as a friend."

He spoke very sincerely, "What's more, she is originally from here, so there's no harm in her staying here. You, the bald donkey, on the other hand, if you stay, you may become dead bald donkey. I simply cannot watch a friend turns into dead bald donkey."

Honest Monk grabbed Lu Xiaofeng's hand again, apparently he was

moved. "Indeed you are a good friend."

"You should have known early on," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Still, knowing now cannot be considered too late," Honest Monk said.

"If you unseal my acupoints now, it can't be considered too late," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Honest Monk immediately agreed, "Indeed it is not too late."

Lu Xiaofeng smiled. He waited for him to make his move.

But Honest Monk continued slowly, "Although it is not too late at all, but unfortunately it is still a bit too early."

"Still too early?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Still too early," Honest Monk replied.

"What are you waiting for?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk said, "At least until the ship sets sail."

Lu Xiaofeng shut his mouth tight; he was very afraid he could not stop himself from raining curses on Honest Monk, because he knew that no matter how he cursed, he could not curse this bald donkey to death.

He could only keep cool, and waited.

If you were Lu Xiaofeng, and you were locked inside the chest with this monk, would you find it bearable or unbearable?

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly said, "I was wondering, would you do me a favor?"

"Speak up," Honest Monk said.

"Could you seal one other acupoint of mine?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Is your qi blocked and you feel ill?" Honest Monk asked.

"No," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"But you really want me to seal another acupoint?" Honest Monk asked.

"I do," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Which acupoint?" Honest Monk asked.

"Sleep acupoint," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

At this kind of moment, what on earth could be more pleasant than a

good sleep?

Honest Monk sighed. "Apparently your luck is not bad at all," he said.

Lu Xiaofeng almost could not refrain from shouting, "You still say my luck is not bad?"

Honest Monk nodded. "At least you still have a friend who could seal your acupoint," he said, "Monk does not have any."

Lu Xiaofeng stared blankly at him. Listening to that kind of words, he really did not know whether he should cry three times, or he ought to laugh three times.

He neither did cry nor laugh. Because he had fallen asleep.

Darkness.

The dream in his sleep was a complete darkness. When he awoke, it was still darkness. The darkness in his sleep was a nightmare, the darkness after he awoke was still a nightmare.

-- What happened to Sha Man?

In his dream he seemed to see Sha Man on the run constantly, but he did not know where she was running to? He did not know either what was she running from?

He wanted to run after her, yet the distance between them kept growing, until what's left of her was a hazy shadow.

When he woke up, he could not even see her shadow.

He seemed to have a floating feeling; obviously this ship has set sail and they were now on the ocean.

Surprisingly, he felt that he could move his limbs.

But he did not move. He was thinking about how to pay Honest Monk back.

In the end this bald donkey did keep his words; as soon as they were out to sea, he unsealed Lu Xiaofeng's acupoints. But if it were not for this bald donkey, how could a pair of lovey-dopey little chicks get separated?

Thinking about the nightmare just now, thinking about Sha Man's plight right now, Lu Xiaofeng really wished he could put a big hole on that bald head.

But even if he made seventy, eighty big holes, what good would that bring?

Lu Xiaofeng sighed inwardly. No matter what, that bald donkey was his old friend, not only that, he could not be considered a bad person anyway.

Although Lu Xiaofeng had to suffer a little bit of pain, he must not violate the big principle.

The ship sailed very smoothly; apparently it was a day with moderate wind, beautiful sun.

Lu Xiaofeng quietly stretched out his hand; he was thinking to seal Honest Monk's acupoint to have him suffer a little bit of pain.

But as soon as his hand was stretched out, Lu Xiaofeng instantly felt something was not right.

This chest suddenly smelled very fragrant, it was inundated with the aroma that he was very familiar with.

It was definitely not the smell of Honest Monk. No matter what, no matter which monk, his body odor could not possibly be like this.

Even a Buddhist nun would not smell like this.

When he reached out, he caught a hand. A smooth, soft and slender jade-like hand.

It can't possibly be Honest Monk's hand.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart was thumping like crazy; he suddenly heard a voice in the darkness, "Finally you are awake."

It was a gentle and beautiful voice, brimming with joy.

Lu Xiaofeng's voice was trembling due to excessive excitement; he almost could not stop his body from trembling as well. "Is it you? Is it really you?"

"It's really me."

Lu Xiaofeng could not believe it. He did not dare to believe it. It was as plain as day that Honest Monk was inside the chest; how could he suddenly become Sha Man?

But this voice, it was really Sha Man's voice.

She took his hand away from her hand, she wanted him to stroke her face, her breasts. Her body also shivered.

Such a shiver of ecstasy; it was also a feeling he was familiar with. He did not care about anything else anymore, with all his strength he embraced her tightly.

Even if it was only a dream, it was a sweet dream. He really wished he would never wake up from this dream.

He hugged her very tight.

This time, he would never let her slip away from his bosom.

She was also hugging him very tight. She was crying, and laughing, and kissing him. She kissed his entire face. Her lips were warm and soft.

"This is not a dream. This is real." She was in tears. "This is really not a dream, this is as real as it could be."

Yet this sort of thing was even stranger than the most absurd dream.

"How did you get here?"

"I don't know?"

"Where is Honest Monk?"

"I don't know."

She really did not know. "I was hiding under the bed, I saw them lifting the chest and taking it out. I was so anxious that I passed out."

"And then what happened?"

"When I woke up, I am already back inside this chest. This really feels like a dream."

"But it's not a dream!"

"Absolutely not."

This was indeed not a dream. She bit his lips. It hurt. A kind of sweet pain.

Could it be another miracle performed by Xiao Yu? Could she have that great of a power?

Although they could not explain all these questions, it did not matter anymore. The only thing that mattered was that they were now together again.

They were embracing each other tightly, as if they were determined to embrace each other for the rest of their lives.

Right this moment, suddenly they heard a 'thump!' from the outside. It looked like someone was kicking the chest.

The chest shook.

Lu Xiaofeng did not move. Sha Man did not move either. They still embraced each other tightly. But he could feel that her lips were turning icy-cold.

And then they heard another 'thump!' This time the chest shook even more violently.

Who was kicking the chest?

Sha Man licked her cold and dry lips. "It's not Gong Jiu," she said quietly.

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Sha Man said, "He can't possibly kick the chest. He can't possibly do such a senseless thing."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed coldly.

Suddenly he felt a bit of anger in his heart, a bit sour.

-- Why is it that when she mentioned this man, the tone of her voice was respectful?

He suddenly straightened himself up, and forced the chest open.

Who would have thought that the lock outside the chest has been removed? As soon as he straightened his waist up, he burst out of the chest.

The dark hold was littered with messy piles of junks and several wooden chests.

Surprisingly, there was no one outside their chest, but someone was hanging from the horizontal beam above, just like a dead fish hanging on the fishhook. Right now he was still swaying from the hook. Right now he was swinging, trying to kick the chest.

"Honest Monk!" Lu Xiaofeng cried out. He almost could not believe his eyes.

Sha Man suddenly entered the chest, while Honest Monk, who was in the chest, suddenly was hanging outside.

What's going on?

Honest Monk's mouth was full of bitter water. When Lu Xiaofeng took out the rags stuffed in his mouth, he threw up.

"Only the Heaven knows what's going on." His astonishment and confusion did not look to be faked. "I was fully awake; for some reason, I suddenly felt very sleepy and fell asleep."

"And when you were awake, you were already hanging like this?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk sighed. "Fortunately you are still in the chest; otherwise, I don't know how long I would have to hang like that?" he said.

"And now you still don't know?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk was startled. Immediately he put out his most friendly smile as he said, "I know."

He smiled until the muscle on his face felt numb. "I know you will definitely help me down."

"I am not in a hurry," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"But I am a little anxious," Honest Monk said.

"So hanging like that does not feel comfortable?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk desperately shook his head.

He was really anxious; cold sweats were flowing like crazy.

Unexpectedly Lu Xiaofeng sat down. He sat on a wooden plank, looking up at him, and leisurely asked, "Is up there nicer and cooler than down here?"

Honest Monk shook his head until it felt numb; he could not help shouting loudly, "It's very nice and cool; it is simply extremely nice and cool."

"Then why are you sweating?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because I am mad," Honest Monk replied, "I am mad at myself, why did I make friends with such a good friend."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. A big laugh.

Seeing Honest Monk was angry, his own anger dissipated by one half.

He was prepared to take the monk down first and deal with him later.

Who would have thought that right this moment, they heard a cough echoing outside the hold. It looked like someone was about to enter the hold.

Lu Xiaofeng immediately got into the chest, gently lifted the lid, and slowly lowered it down.

Before the lid was even fully closed, he saw the door to the hold was pushed open, two people walked in.

The one in front looked like one of the men who brought the chest in a moment ago.

Lu Xiaofeng was secretly praying, he hoped this time they were not going to take the chest away.

Inside the chest was total darkness, not the least bit of noise was heard from the outside.

Why did they come here?

Suddenly seeing a monk hanging from the beam, how come there was no reaction at all?

Lu Xiaofeng grabbed Sha Man's hand. Her hand was icy-cold.

His hand was not nice and warm either. He had already had regret; he should have had Honest Monk down just now.

Only now did he finally understand, when one is always thinking of how to fix others, oftentimes the one who get fixed would be himself.

After waiting for half a day, there was still nothing stirring outside. He grew more anxious; he almost could not restrain himself from opening the lid a crack, just to see what's going on out there?

Just then, suddenly someone was knocking on the chest. 'Knock, knock, knock', the knocking was very light. Obviously it was not a kick with a foot. Naturally it couldn't be Honest Monk, whose hands and feet were bound.

This kind of knocking sounded more like a very polite guest waiting outside the door.

Too bad the host did not welcome the guest at all.

The host actually wanted to open the door, but the hostess was adamant on holding his hand back.

Since the host did not open the door, the guest did not have any choice but to open it himself. He only opened it a crack.

A very little crack.

Lu Xiaofeng wanted to look outside from the crack, but there was a whiff of steam blowing from the outside. A sweet-smelling and rich steam; it smelled so good that those who smell it will have their mouths water. Even people who had never had beef soup before would be absolutely certain that the aroma was that of the beef soup.

[1] Little girl, orig. 'yatou' – girl or servant girl, may be derogatory or term of endearment.

Chapter 13 – The wind and waves of the Sea of Vinegar

Lu Xiaofeng has had beef soup.

He has always liked eating beef soup, but now he wanted to vomit. Because his stomach contracted, and his heart was sinking.

Could it be that everything was a game played by the 'Beef Soup'? Like the kind of game a cat would play after it catches the mouse?

Finally the steam gradually scattered.

Lu Xiaofeng found a pair of eyes outside, looking in at them from the crack on the chest. The eyes were shining with some kind of mischievous smile.

Unexpectedly someone was singing outside, "Knock, knock, knock, please open the door. Who's there? I am the old rooster. What do you want? I am here to deliver beef soup, so that when the little chicks drink it, they will be strong, not afraid of wind, not afraid of waves." [Translator's note: in Chinese, the words 'soup', 'strong', and 'waves' rhyme.]

Lu Xiaofeng was stunned again. The singing voice did not belong to Beef Soup at all. Even when Lu Xiaofeng sang his nursery rhyme, his singing voice would be a bit better than this. Perhaps in the whole wide world, there was nobody who could sing worse than this man.

Honest Monk!

Lu Xiaofeng quickly pushed the lid open. Someone was squatting outside, holding a bowl of beef soup with both hands. It was indeed Honest Monk.

Just now he was obviously bound and hung from the beam. How come now he was down there?

Honest Monk winked. He said, "Monk is honest, Bodhisattva bless and protect Monk!"

This kind of matter was indeed a bit mysterious, it really did not look like something within human's power to do.

Lu Xiaofeng also winked, "I wonder if Bodhisattva also kills cow?"

Honest Monk instantly shook his head. "My Buddha abstains from killing life, how could Bodhisattva kill a cow?"

"So Bodhisattva also can't possibly give Monk some beef soup?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Of course not," Honest Monk replied.

"In that case," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Where did this beef soup come from?"

Honest Monk suddenly chuckled. "Why don't you guess?" he said.

Lu Xiaofeng did not want to guess.

It was not the first time that he had seen the color and flavor of this bowl of beef soup, but he would rather see one big bowl of dog poo; he did not wish to see this sweet-smelling and rich beef soup.

Because he knew that only one person could cook this kind of beef soup.

-- Only 'Beef Soup' can cook this kind of beef soup.

Honest Monk suddenly said, "This bowl of beef soup is from an old friend of yours, who asked the Monk to deliver it to you."

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Honest Monk continued, "She said that these past two days the two of you must have toiled excessively, and that you must need something nourishing." He seemed to blush a little, "This is not Monk's words, Monk actually did not want to say it, but that friend of yours insisted that Monk pass it on to you."

"Where is she?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk said, "She says she'll be coming soon to see you, she says to tell you not to worry."

With a straight face Lu Xiaofeng said, "I also have some things I'd like you to pass on to her."

Honest Monk said, "Monk is all ears."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Tell her that I'd rather be with a b1tch [female dog] eating poo than seeing her, let alone drinking her beef soup."

Suddenly from behind a stack of crates at the corner of the room someone sighed and said, "Such a nice man, why would he want to be with a b1tch eating poo?"

It was not Beef Soup's voice either. The voice was very tender and lovely, it sounded like a very young girl's voice.

Just as she finished speaking, sure enough, a very young girl really jumped out from behind the crates.

Lu Xiaofeng was immediately relieved. "Xiao Yu!" he cried out.

Giggling, Xiao Yu looked at him, she blinked her big eyes several times, and said, "Can you not be with a b1tch? Can you be with a [male] dog instead?"

"I can't," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Why?" Xiao Yu asked.

"Because I want to be with you." Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Xiao Yu blushed.

Honest Monk suddenly said, "Why must you prevent him from being with a b1tch?"

"Because I was afraid Miss Man would drink vinegar," Xiao Yu replied.
[Reminder, 'vinegar' means jealousy.]

Lu Xiaofeng snatched the bowl of beef soup from Honest Monk's hand and said, "You want to drink vinegar, I am going to drink beef soup."

The beef soup was extremely tasty.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "Turns out Beef Soup is not the only one in the world who can cook this kind of beef soup."

"Who else can?" Xiao Yu asked.

"You," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I can only eat," Xiao Yu said.

"You did not make this?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Not only I can eat," Xiao Yu replied, "I can also steal. I stole this from

the kitchen."

"There is someone in the kitchen who can make this kind of beef soup?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Only one person," Xiao Yu replied.

"Who?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Beef Soup," Xiao Yu replied.

Lu Xiaofeng shut his mouth up.

Xiao Yu rolled her eyes and then said, "Actually, you ought to know, this time naturally she also get on board the ship."

"Why must she come?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because I secretly hid a skiff," Xiao Yu replied, "Therefore, she must knew that you are escaping on this ship; otherwise, how come they could not find you?" She sighed, and then continued, "It was because they could not find you that these past two days Ninth Young Master and Princess' temper was really annoying. Fortunately they would never dream who did all these things."

"So who did all these things?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Yu pointed her forefinger toward her own nose.

"It was you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"If not me, who else?" Xiao Yu said.

"The one who sent Sha Man here was you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Of course it was me," Xiao Yu said.

"The one who hang Honest Monk was also you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"The one who let him down was also me," Xiao Yu said.

Lu Xiaofeng stared at her in disbelief, as if she had just sprouted two horns on her head.

Xiao Yu said, "You don't believe I can do all those things?"

Honestly, Lu Xiaofeng did not believe the least bit.

Xiao Yu chuckled and said, "If even you do not believe, Ninth Young Master and Princess naturally do not believe even more."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Therefore, they did not suspect it to be you."

"Not even in their dream," Xiao Yu said.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. He felt that the saying 'you can't judge a person by appearance' was really true.

Right this moment, there was some strange gurgling noise somewhere in the hold. Everybody was startled, and then they found out that that 'somewhere' was actually Honest Monk's tummy.

Xiao Yu laughed. She looked at his tummy and giggling incessantly.

With a red face Honest Monk said, "What's so funny? Monk is also human, when the tummy is hungry, it can cry out."

Xiao Yu said sweetly, "But Monk's tummy's crying sounds especially pleasant to hear."

"But Monk does not like to hear it the least bit," Honest Monk said.

"So what does Monk like?" Xiao Yu asked.

"Monk only likes to watch," Honest Monk replied.

"Watch what?" Xiao Yu asked.

Honest Monk said, "Watching mantou [steamed bun], salted vegetabled, dried radish ... As long as it can be eaten, Monk loves to

watch."

"Is beef soup not nice to watch?" Xiao Yu asked.

"Monk does not eat non-vegetarian food," Honest Monk replied.

"In that case," Xiao Yu said, "Monk can only have hungry tummy, can only listen to your tummy crying out." And then she turned to Sha Man, "Miss Man does not eat beef soup too?"

"I don't," Sha Man replied.

"Miss Man is not hungry?" Xiao Yu asked.

"Not hungry," Sha Man replied, "Even if I am, I won't eat."

Xiao Yu laughed again, "Turns out Miss Man has eaten vinegar. Turns out eating vinegar can also make you full."

Honest Monk suddenly grabbed the beef soup and said, "She does not eat, I'll eat."

"Since when did Monk start eating non-vegetarian food?" Xiao Yu asked.

"When I am hungry like crazy," Honest Monk replied.

Mouthful by mouthful he ate. And when he was tired eating, he sighed and said, "Wine and meat already entered the intestines, Buddha sat in the heart. Monk ate a bit of beef soup, actually it doesn't matter."

Lu Xiaofeng could not help laughing. "Indeed it doesn't matter," he said.

Honest Monk suddenly sprang up and loudly said, "It does."

"What's the matter?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk said, "It frighteningly matters, Monk ..." before he even finished, he fell face up on his back, with white foams appearing on the corners of his mouth.

Immediately Lu Xiaofeng also felt that his head was a bit dizzy. With faltering voice he said, "There's drug in the bowl of soup."

Xiao Yu's countenance changed, "Who put the drug?" she asked.

"I was just about to ask you," Lu Xiaofeng said.

He wanted to stand up and pounce on her, but unfortunately his limbs had turned numb and soft.

Xiao Yu kept shaking her head, "I didn't do it, it wasn't me ..." she said.

Looking at Lu Xiaofeng's fiendish expression, she was so scared that she

wanted to run away. Too bad Sha Man had already blocked her way out.

"If it wasn't you, then who?" she coldly said.

Xiao Yu did not know.

But there was someone outside the door answering, "It wasn't she, it was me."

On the earth, there was only one person who could cook this kind of beef soup. Naturally there was also only one person who could put drug in the soup. It was Beef Soup herself.

The beef soup Beef Soup produced was very sweet-smelling and nice-looking. She herself was also very sweet-smelling, and very nice-looking. Especially today.

It looked like she made special effort to dress-up today. She wore bright-colored and well-fitting clothes. The rouge on her face was neither thick nor tasteless. As it turned out, her makeup matched very well with her personality.

It was only today that Lu Xiaofeng found out that not only she knew how to dress, she was also very adept at putting makeup on her face!

Although Lu Xiaofeng did not drink the soup too much, right now his head was dizzy, his eyes shone with lewdness, as if he was drunk with wine. "I know you can't possibly treat me like this," he suddenly yelled.

"Oh?" Beef Soup said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "You are dressing up especially for me to see, I'm sure you won't do that to me."

With a grim expression Beef Soup said coldly, "Of course I won't do that to you. I just want you to be with a b1tch eating poo."

Turned out she had been here for quite some time, perhaps she even came here with Xiao Yu. But looking at Xiao Yu, it was obvious that that was not the case.

Xiao Yu appeared to be scared to death; practically, she looked like she was about to faint any time. She was thinking of sneaking out.

Beef Soup simply ignored her.

The ship was in the middle of the ocean. Those on the ship, where could they run to?

Xiao Yu seemed to also understand this logic. Not only she did not slip out, she slammed the cabin door instead.

Beef Soup quickly turned around, glowered at her, and said sternly, "What do you think you are doing?"

"I am not doing anything," Xiao Yu replied, "I just want you to

accompany the Monk drinking the soup!"

There was still half a bowl of beef soup.

Xiao Yu said, "This beef soup is very good, it would be a pity if you don't finish it."

Beef Soup's countenance changed. Even if the rouge on her face was wiped off a little bit, other people would still be unable to see. Unfortunately the makeup on her face was neither too thick nor too thin. It was just enough for other people to see that her countenance had changed.

Sha Man's countenance did not change. Her face has always been pale, but her as-sharp-as-blade eyes were fixed on Beef Soup.

Although Xiao Yu was smiling, her smile also concealed a blade in it.

They understood Beef Soup very well. On the earth, very few people understood Beef Soup like they did. This fact, naturally Beef Soup herself also understood very well.

She looked at Xiao Yu. "Do you dare?" she asked.

Xiao Yu said, "Why don't I?" She smiled before continuing, "I can see clearly that you are scared; because you originally thought that we are afraid of you. But we are not afraid; therefore, you are scared."

What she said sounded complicated, but the logic behind it was actually very simple.

-- You are not afraid of me, I am scared of you.

Interpersonal relationship is oftentimes like that.

Sha Man slowly took out a very thin steel wire from the lining of the lapel of her gown, and she played with it in her hands.

Steel wire was thin, but very tough and durable. The metal flickered under the light.

Her hands were slender but powerful. Very soon the steel wire in Sha Man's hand would turn into a silhouette of dancing swordswoman, the sharp end was the sword.

Her finger plucked lightly, the sword style changed indeterminately.

Xiao Yu sweetly said, "I can't imagine Miss Man's swordsmanship is this good."

Sha Man nonchalantly said, "The things that are unimaginable in this world are indeed too many."

Beef Soup no longer said anything. Immediately she walked over and drank the rest of the half-bowl of beef soup.

The amount that she drank was not less than Honest Monk, but she did not show the least bit of reaction. Obviously she had taken the antidote.

Xiao Yu laughed and said, "The beef soup is seasoned with the Monk's spittle, I wonder if it tastes better?"

Beef Soup shut her mouth.

Xiao Yu said, "Actually, you should be happy. No matter what, Monk's spittle has always been hard to find."

Beef Soup coldly said, "I am very happy, I am happy as hell."

Xiao Yu laughed and said, "It's good that you are happy. I was afraid you might be unhappy."

"And now, are you going to let me go?" Beef Soup asked.

"No," Sha Man said.

"What else do you want me to do?" Beef Soup asked.

"Strip," Sha Man said.

"Strip?" Beef Soup said, "What do you mean strip?"

"Strip all your clothes," Sha Man said, "Anything that can be stripped

must be stripped."

Beef Soup's countenance changed again; she started at her hatefully. Sha Man remained emotionless. Her hands were still playing with the steel wire. In her slender hands, the tough and durable steel wire was as pliable as a strip of cotton yarn.

Beef Soup turned her head toward Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng was laughing; his laughter looked a bit like an idiot!

Other than laughing, he seemed to have nothing better to do. Although he did not pass out, his response was very slow.

Sha Man coldly said, "You don't need to look at him, it's not that he had never seen you naked."

She was still jealous. When a woman is jealous, usually she cannot speak reasons.

Beef Soup began to strip.

Xiao Yu laughed and said, "She strips very fast."

"Because she is used to doing it," Sha Man said.

Xiao Yu sighed deliberately; she said, "I just wondered why she has

never caught cold."

Beef Soup did not seem to hear. When she was dressed, she was a good-looking woman, after she stripped, she looked even better.

Her legs were very straight, exceptionally sturdy. Her skin was smooth and tight. When she put her legs together, not even a finger would be able to penetrate them!

No doubt she was the kind of women who can make men lose their minds. To this fact, she was also very confident of herself.

Xiao Yu sighed again. "Excellent body," she said, "If I were a man, I would have been fainted by now."

"Too bad you are not a man," Sha Man said.

Xiao Yu laughed and said, "Fortunately I am not. But neither are you!"

Beef Soup suddenly said, "But both of you are not women either."

"We are not?" Xiao Yu asked.

Beef Soup said, "If you really want to be a woman, you still have a lot to learn."

"Can you teach us?" Xiao Yu asked.

Beef Soup stared at her. Her eyes suddenly shone with strange expression, her eyes were brimming with some kind of unspeakable desire.

For some unknown reason, Xiao Yu's face suddenly blushed.

Beef Soup softly said, "Why don't you strip too? Let me teach you."

Xiao Yu felt her mouth dry; she could not even speak.

Beef Soup walked toward her slowly, her hips swayed in some exotic, almost evil, cadence.

Suddenly there was a flash of cold light, coming straight toward her breasts. The steel wire was stretched straight, just like a sword, but was sharper than a sword.

Beef Soup leaped up and made a back flip in the air; her most secret place happened to flash right in front of Xiao Yu's face.

Her legs were straight, but an even more straight and strong steel wire suddenly turned into a whip, sweeping horizontally, coiling toward her legs. She pulled her legs in, suddenly she landed behind Lu Xiaofeng, her palm pressed on his Yuzhen [jade pillow] acupoint.

"You move, he die."

Sha Man did not move.

Xiao Yu did not move either. She stared at her naked body as if she was bewitched.

Beef Soup laughed. Squinting, she looked at her and said with a laugh, "Xiao Yu [little jade], little darling, I like you, I always like you very much. Do you remember that when you were little, I used to carry you to bed?"

Xiao Yu's face was even redder, but she involuntarily nodded.

Beef Soup said, "If you kill Sha Man for me now, I will like you even more."

Xiao Yu hesitated. She looked at her eyes. Her eyes were filled with evil, erotic charm.

Suddenly Xiao Yu threw herself at Sha Man, lightning fast she made her move; she snatched the steel wire from Sha Man's hand.

Evidently Sha Man did not anticipate this move at all; she did not guard against her, even more, she did not imagine Xiao Yu would be able to move this fast.

The steel wire immediately changed hands. With a flash of cold light it suddenly pierced toward Beef Soup's throat.

This move was even more unexpected, and was even faster. But Beef

Soup was not taken by surprise at all. Pulling herself back, she hid behind Lu Xiaofeng!

"You really want him dead?"

Xiao Yu did not dare to move.

Beef Soup slowly stood up, her laughter was even more joyful. "Now, can I have you do something for me?" she said.

"What is it?" Xiao Yu asked.

"Strip," Beef Soup said. Her eyes shone. "Both of you, strip all your clothes," she said, "Anything that can be stripped must be stripped."

Xiao Yu turned her head toward Sha Man. Sha Man's face was still pale.

"I'll count to ten," Beef Soup said, "If you still have not stripped, there will be a dead person in here."

She started to count already. "One, two, three ..."

Xiao Yu already began to strip. Sha Man had no choice but to comply. Both knew that she dared to do what she dared to say.

She was counting fast, their movement could not be not fast.

Beef Souo giggled. "Turns out you also are used to stripping."

After saying that, she continued counting, "Four, five, six ..."

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng reached back, with his fingers he pinched her wrist, and flung her over his shoulder. Just like a dead fish she fell heavily on the floor.

He should not be able to do it so easily, but she was inevitably a bit too complacent.

One should not be too complacent.

Xiao Yu pounced on top of her. Using her knee she pinned her waist down, and then with a laugh she asked Lu Xiaofeng, "Why did you wait until now to make your move?"

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled and said, "I was going to wait until she counts to ten."

Sha Man pursed her lips; she glowered at Lu Xiaofeng, but her pale face was blushing a little.

Perhaps Beef Soup was dizzy from the fall, it was half a day later that she finally opened her mouth. She laughed aloud and said, "Are you all going to rape me?"

"I am not interested," Xiao Yu said, "I don't think he feels the need either."

"In that case," Beef Soup said, "You'd better let me go now; otherwise, you won't be able to escape either."

"Oh?" Xiao Yu said.

Beef Soup said, "If he didn't see me for a while, Jiu Ge would look for me everywhere. On this ship, where do you think you can escape to?"

Xiao Yu looked at Sha Man. Both of them closed their mouths. They knew she was telling the truth.

Beef Soup laughed again. With a tender voice she said, "Xiao Yu, little darling, quickly take your leg off, it tickles."

Xiao Yu could not see Sha Man's reaction, she looked at Lu Xiaofeng instead.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly said, "Is there any lifeboat on this ship?"

"There are two," Xiao Yu said.

"Are they guarded?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Yu said, "We can deal with the guards, but even if we manage to

grab one, it will be useless."

-- Because none of them could deal with Ninth Young Master.

She did not say it out loud, she did not need to.

To get the small boat down to the sea, row it far away so that the big ship could not find it, it would need at least two hours.

Gong Jiu could not possibly give them two hours.

Lu Xiaofeng muttered irresolutely, "Right now the people upstairs do not know Xiao Yu has rebelled; if she wants to seize the boat, presumably it won't be difficult."

Xiao Yu said, "But ..."

Lu Xiaofeng cut her off; he suddenly asked, "Around this time, where usually is Gong Jiu?"

"In his cabin," Xiao Yu replied.

"Other than him," Lu Xiaofeng continued, "Are there martial art experts on this ship?"

Xiao Yu shook her head and said, "He always come and go alone."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "His cabin must be the main cabin on this ship."

Sha Man suddenly rushed forward, "You ... you are not thinking of looking for him, are you?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "Actually, I did not want to go, but now I have no choice but go."

Sha Man was even more anxious. "Why?" she asked.

"Because you have something you have no choice but to sell to him," Lu Xiaofeng said, "And he does not seem to have any choice but to buy."

"What is it?" Sha Man asked.

"A big bowl of sweet-smelling and rich beef soup," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Sha Man's eyes shone. "What do you think the price will be?" she asked.

"My price is not high at all," Lu Xiaofeng replied. He did not let Sha Man ask further, "First, put Beef Soup in the chest. As soon as I leave, you go seize the life boats. Both of them."

Sha Man looked at him. Her eyes were brimming with concern. "Perhaps Gong Jiu does not want this bowl of beef soup, perhaps he only wants your life."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "No matter doing what business, we always have to take some risk!" he said.

His laughter was not joyous at all, "As soon as you see Gong Jiu alone on the deck and don't see me ..."

"We'll kill her right away?" Sha Man asked.

Lu Xiaofeng nodded slowly. He suddenly felt very uncomfortable in his heart.

He did not wish to take Beef Soup's life at all, he did not wish the situation would develop to that direction even more.

Unfortunately, he did not have any leeway in this matter at all.

Sha Man could not help grabbing his hand and said, "You ... when do you think you'll leave?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "As soon as Monk is awake."

Sha Man forced a laugh and said, "Naturally we must wait for him to wake up; we need a man to carry the chest!"

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed, but his heart was jumbled.

He knew that it was not what she wanted to say; he could see clearly

the fear and anxiety in her eyes.

But what else can she say right now?

Even though she knew that most likely this time they would part forever, she could only let him go.

Because Sha Man also realized that this time they did not have any leeway in this matter at all.

Xiao Yu looked at them. She suddenly said, "Right now Monk is not awake yet, the chest is still empty; are you going to let it stay empty?"

Chapter 14 – Smooth negotiation

Honest Monk woke up, Lu Xiaofeng left, and Beef Soup was in the chest.

Now it was time to commence their operation, yet Sha Man still did not want to go.

She looked at Xiao Yu, her eyes were full of gratitude. She said gently, "You have been with them, brother and sister, since you were young?"

"Since I was seven," Xiao Yu replied, "I am an orphan, if not for Old Master rescuing me, I would have drown in the ocean long ago."

"Hence you have been very loyal to Gong family members?" Sha Man said.

Xiao Yu blinked; she said, "If Miss Man wants to chat with me, when we are on the lifeboat, we will definitely have a lot of time to talk."

Sha Man did not seem to hear that; she continued, "What kind of man Ninth Young Master is, naturally you know very well, don't you?"

Xiao Yu only nodded.

Sha Man said, "Right now Lu Xiaofeng is looking for him; this time there is a very good chance he won't come back."

Xiao Yu said, "But ..."

Sha Man cut her off, "If he died, Gong Zhu [princess] will also die, none of us will be able to live. Therefore ..." Suddenly she pulled Xiao Yu's hand and said, "Therefore, there is something I must tell you."

"Must Miss Man tell me that right now?" Xiao Yu asked.

Sha Man nodded. "It's only three characters," she said.

"Three characters?" Xiao Yu asked, "Which three characters?"

"Thank you [xie xie ni]," Sha Man said.

Xiao Yu looked at her, the rim of her eyes turned red.

Sha Man continued, "Right now we are in the face of danger, but if it wasn't for you, we would not even have this chance. Therefore, if we can survive this time, I hope you can always be together with us."

Xiao Yu lowered her head, her face blushed. Of course she understood Sha Man very well. Of course by 'us' Sha Man was talking about Lu Xiaofeng and she, two people.

In a tender voice Sha Man said, "I am a very jealous woman, but this time I am sincere."

Finally Xiao Yu said quietly, "I turned sixteen this year."

Sixteen-year old was the age where girls usually experience their first awakening of love.

Xiao Yu said, "Lu Xiaofeng is a very attractive man, I believe there are a lot of girls who like him."

"And you?" Sha Man asked.

Xiao Yu blushed; her voice grew even softer, "Of course I cannot say that I don't like him, but ..." Suddenly she looked up and gazed directly on Sha Man's face, "But I am doing all these not because of him."

"It's not?" Sha Man asked.

"Absolutely not," Xiao Yu replied.

Her voice was sincere but very firm, anybody could hear that she was not lying.

"Could it be because of me?" Sha Man asked.

"It's not," Xiao Yu said. There was a strange look on her eyes. "I am doing it for me."

Sha Man was caught by surprise. "But you did not need to take such a

risk?" she said.

"I have my reason," Xiao Yu said.

"Can you tell me?" Sha Man asked.

"Not now," Xiao Yu said. She let out a forced laugh, and then slowly continued, "If Lu Xiaofeng can come back alive, I will definitely tell you. Even if you do not wish to listen, you simply have to."

Midnight, the breeze was still, the waves were quiet. The ship was sailing, fast and steady. At this rate, the ship would land by nightfall the day after tomorrow.

There were two boatmen on the ship, those who were not on duty were asleep. If you go to the bottom deck, you would hear them snoring.

It doesn't matter who, snores are never pleasant to the ears, especially if the one snoring was sleeping right next to you. Some people's snores even make you wish that you were deaf.

But right now Lu Xiaofeng actually thought that their snore was very pleasant to his ears, because this kind of snore not only made him feel safe, it could also help him to stay awake.

Was Gong Jiu also asleep?

Of course not. Even if he were, he could not possibly slumber this deep.

He was an extraordinary man, a super human. His abilities, everything he had, was not anything other people would even dream of obtaining.

It was as if he was able to stay awake forever.

Soon he was about to face such man, how would Lu Xiaofeng feel?

He had heard too many legends about this individual, but meeting face to face was a completely different matter.

-- Were those legends, which were approaching fairy tales, true?

In the cool night like this, a night as cool as water in jade container, what was he doing?

Was he sitting alone in meditation? Or was he enjoying his time alone?

The sailors on duty were working, every man was on his assigned station, nobody dared to wander even for half a step.

There was no guard on duty outside the main cabin.

With the Ninth Young Master here, who dared to recklessly step out of line?

It had given Lu Xiaofeng not a few convenience, it was very easy for him

to find the main cabin. The cabin door was closed, outside the door there was no footprints at all. No one dared to disturb the Ninth Young Master's tranquility, especially when the time showed that it was the middle of the night. Other than Gong Zhu, nobody was allowed to linger around the cabin or spying on him.

It was at this time that Lu Xiaofeng arrived.

He neither lingered nor spied on him, he just knew that the Ninth Young Master was inside the cabin!

He had not knocked on the door when he heard weird noises coming from inside.

It sounded like someone was moaning, was gasping for breath; it sounded like a dying animal struggling in pain.

Lu Xiaofeng stiffened. Was there someone else inside? Was the Ninth Young Master torturing him?

Aren't there people in the world who love to abuse other people for their enjoyment?

From behind the door suddenly came a low groan, "Quickly come and save me, I can't bear it anymore!"

Lu Xiaofeng could not bear it either, he has always hated madmen who love to abuse other people for their enjoyment. With all his might he broke the door and rushed in.

There was only one person in the cabin, a young man whose hair was in a mess, whose complexion pale, who was struggling and rolling around on the floor, half naked.

His body was pale and thin, full of bloodstain, which actually the result of he pricking himself with a needle. There was a needle in his hand.

The cabin was decorated in sophisticated, elegant and magnificent manners, the clothing items scattered on the floor were also of high-quality, the material and workmanship were top-notch.

This was, no doubt, Gong Jiu's cabin.

Nobody tortured him, why did he torture himself?

Seeing Lu Xiaofeng came in, although he was shocked, intolerable pain and desire has made him completely losing mind.

He called again in low voice, "Whip ... whip ..."

There was indeed a whip hanging on the wooden frame of the headboard of the bed.

"Whip me ... whip me hard ..."

Lu Xiaofeng saw the whip, but he did not move, he only looked at him coldly.

The man was also looking at him, his eyes were begging for pity. "Have mercy ... quickly get the whip!" he pleaded.

Lu Xiaofeng sat down. He sat as far away as possible from the man.

Now he started to think that most likely this man was Gong Jiu; he knew that there are people in the world who love to torture themselves.

Although self-inflicted pain is a kind of perversion, it is also a kind of sexual release.

Lu Xiaofeng could never understand this kind of people, yet seeing Gong Jiu, he had a sudden realization.

-- The things he had achieved were simply too much, and he achieved it too easily. Therefore, the desire in his heart could only be truly satisfied by this self-inflicted pain.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at him coldly. "You are waiting for Gong Zhu, aren't you?" he said, "She loves to whip people, I don't."

The pleading eyes of this man suddenly turned into hatred and enmity. Gasping for breath, he said, "So what do you like? Sha Man?"

Suddenly he roared in laughter, a laughter like that of a madman, "If you think that woman is a wise and virtuous woman, you are wrong. She is a whore."

Lu Xiaofeng's hand tightened into a fist.

The man laughed maniacally, "She is a hundred-percent wh0re, for a piece of fatty meat she is willing to go to bed with anybody. She already went to bed with a man when she was thirteen."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly rushed over and picked up the whip. Others insulted him, he might not be this angry; but when people insulted the one he loved, he absolutely could not stand it! No one can.

The man laughed aloud, "Are you angry?" he said, "Because you know that I am telling you the truth?"

Lu Xiaofeng gnashed his teeth. Suddenly the whip lashed down, lashing down on his pale and skinny chest.

The first lash came down, the second lash was not so difficult. The man's eyes shone, but his mouth was still cursing constantly. The harder the whip, the brighter his eyes, and the filthier the curse from his mouth. It was a double-venting.

His body suddenly curled up, and stretched out, and then he just lay there, unmoving. His desire has been met.

Lu Xiaofeng staggered back and sat down. His clothes were wet. His anger has been vented.

He suddenly found himself to have some strange, almost evil, satisfaction in his heart.

This kind of feeling made him sick in the stomach, he nearly could not stop himself from vomiting.

He closed his eyes, and forced himself to calm down. When he opened his eyes again, the person on the floor had disappeared.

The cabin eerily quiet. If not for the whip in his hand, he would think that what happened just now was a nightmare.

Just then, a man walked out slowly from the inner room. His jet-black hair in a tidy bun, not a single strand was off. His snow-white outfit had no wrinkle at all. His handsome, almost like exquisitely carved statue, face was cold and arrogant; it also carried a determined expression. His gaze was as sharp as a blade.

Was this the same man? Who would believe it? But Lu Xiaofeng had no choice but to believe.

This was neither a miracle nor a nightmare. This was something real. Sometimes the truth was far more bizarre, more dreadful, and more disgusting than a nightmare.

The man's blade-like eyes were staring at Lu Xiaofeng's face. Suddenly he said, "I am Gong Jiu."

"I know!" Lu Xiaofeng was indifferent.

At last he found out what kind of person Gong Jiu really was.

-- He was not a deity, he was not a superhuman either, he was no more than a snail.

Because he was always hiding inside his superhuman shell, just like a snail. Only when there was no one else around did he come out for some fresh air!

Maybe because he was cooped up inside the shell for a long time that the desire in his heart must be vented.

He chose the most disgusting way of venting, only this kind of way would really satisfy his desire!

Now that he was satisfied, he was again hiding inside his cold, hard, and shiny shell. But Lu Xiaofeng was no longer afraid of him.

If a man can really have a good look at the other man, he will never again have to fear him.

"So you are Gong Jiu?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I am," Gong Jiu replied.

"I am sure you never expected that I would come to find you," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"There are indeed too many people who are unafraid of death," Gong Jiu coldly said, "You are not the only one."

"But I am afraid of death," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"And so you must have regretted it," Gong Jiu said.

"Regret?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"You regret why didn't you kill me just now," Gong Jiu said.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, "Just now I did have the opportunity to kill you, didn't I?" he said.

"You did not," Gong Jiu said.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. He looked at the whip in his hand, and started to laugh again.

But there was not a hint of shame on Gong Jiu's face, as if a moment ago the whip has never lashed on his body!

"I didn't kill you," Lu Xiaofeng said, "It's my own mistake, I don't need your gratitude. But you ..."

He stopped; because suddenly Gong Jiu did a very strange thing. He

suddenly shed off his own clothes, revealing his chest and back. His skin was just as smooth and white as jade.

Lu Xiaofeng stiffened again.

-- Where did the whip marks and bloodstains on this man's body go?

He did not understand! Although he had also heard a legend about mysterious martial art skill, which when trained to a certain level, the practitioner would have some fantastic regeneration power, they would be able to heal and close up any wound and scar in the twinkling of an eye. But he had always thought that it was just some kind of absurd legend.

Gong Jiu put on his clothes again; he looked at him calmly, "Do you understand it now?" he asked.

"Understand what?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Just now you didn't make any mistake," Gong Jiu said, "Because practically you did not have any opportunity."

"Therefore," Lu Xiaofeng said, "You really don't need to thank me."

"Therefore," Gong Jiu said, "Now you have to die."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed again.

Gong Jiu continued, "Anybody who had done something they are not supposed to do will have to die."

"Much less I have just seen something I am not supposed to see," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Gong Jiu suddenly let out a soft sigh. "Too bad right now I can't kill you," he said.

"Because you have never killed anybody for free?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"For you, I can always make an exception," Gong Jiu said.

"So why don't you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Gong Jiu stared at him for a long time. Suddenly he asked, "Where is she?"

It was a really weird question, he did not even explain which 'she' he was talking about.

But Lu Xiaofeng did not show the slightest bit of hesitation. "In the chest," he replied.

"Do you know who am I talking about?" Gong Jiu asked.

"I do," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Yet he could not help asking, "You also knew that she has fallen into our hands?"

Gong Jiu said, "You are afraid of death, yet you came here. Naturally you did not come to deliver your life."

The two of them stared at each other, there was some kind of strange expression in their eyes.

It does not matter what kind of expression, but there was, more-or-less, some respect in it!

Sometimes, this kind of respect between enemies can far surpass solemn respect between friends.

Another long time passed. Finally Gong Jiu said slowly, "You want to use her life in exchange of your two lives?"

"Not two lives," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Four."

Gong Jiu said, "The other two belong to Honest Monk and Xiao Yu?"

Lu Xiaofeng could not deny that this person indeed had some superhuman qualities.

Gong Jiu said, "And you want ..."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I only want one sichen [two hours]." He explained further, "I'll take her go, your ship turned around, one sichen later, I'll let her go."

"You have seized both lifeboats from the ships?" Gong Jiu asked.

"I know Xiao Yu is not going to let me down," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"One sichen," Gong Jiu said, "And then you'll let her to be with me?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Four people do not need two lifeboats. One boat is exactly to for her."

"You are very thorough," Gong Jiu said.

"And I can also keep my words," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Only those who don't talk too much will be able to keep their words," Gong Jiu said.

"Do you think I look like someone who talks too much?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

No, you don't!

"Can you forget what happened these past few days?" Gong Jiu asked.

"I cannot," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Nobody could forget these things!

"Can you keep a secret for us?" Gong Jiu asked.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, he said, "Your business, even if I told it, who would believe?"

Gong Jiu stared at him, there was a hint of satisfaction in his eyes. "Looks like you never easily agree to promise anything to anybody," he said.

"That's correct!" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Those who don't make a promise easily won't break their promise easily either," Gong Jiu said.

"I always strive to fulfill my promise," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"In that case, I am sure that when she returns, she will be safe and sound," Gong Jiu said.

"That's a promise," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I am also sure that by this time the lifeboats have been put down,"

Gong Jiu said.

"Very likely," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Gong Jiu slowly stood up and said, "In that case, as soon as you leave, you will see that this ship has turned around."

He stood up, signaling that this meeting has ended.

Lu Xiaofeng also stood up. He looked at him, smiled, and said, "Doing business with you is indeed a pleasant thing."

"Same here," Gong Jiu replied flatly.

Lu Xiaofeng strode out, and pulled the cabin door open.

Looking at his back, Gong Jiu suddenly said, "I only hope that this is the last time."

"The last time we see each other?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Gong Jiu slowly nodded. "Next time you see me, I believe it won't be too enjoyable for both of us," he said.

"I believe the same thing," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Dark ocean, rising waves. The small boat was adrift on the waves, just

like a single grain of rice in a pot of boiling water.

Lu Xiaofeng and Honest Monk sat side-by-side, rowing together; Xiao Yu held the rudder.

Gong Jiu's ship had already turned around; they had been sailing in the dark for a long time.

Suddenly Honest Monk asked, "Did you really see Gong Jiu?"

"Uh huh," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Actually, what kind of man is he?" Honest Monk asked.

Lu Xiaofeng was deep in thought. He had asked the same question to many people, and now suddenly someone was asking him the same question. He pondered over his reply, but the final result was, "I don't know."

The longer he mulled it over, the more he thought that those three words 'I don't know' were the best answer.

Because essentially he did not understand the man.

"You have seen the man face to face, yet you still don't know?" Honest Monk said.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "I only know one thing."

"Which one?" Honest Monk asked.

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng replied, "I absolutely don't want to see him again, and I absolutely do not wish to fight with him."

From the aft, Xiao Yu suddenly sighed and said, "Unfortunately, there are things that although you do not wish to do, in the end you will have no choice but to do it."

"Are you saying that I may see him again?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Xiao Yu was silent. She looked at the boundless dark ocean, unexpectedly she did not seem to hear the question.

-- Did the little girl hide a secret in her heart?

The other small boat was tied with a rope behind the first boat. She suddenly let go of the rudder, and pulled the other small boat over. "The time must have arrived," she said, "We ought to let her go."

Sha Man silently opened the chest. Beef Soup, still naked, was still curling inside the chest; she did not even move.

Under the faint starlight, her naked body looked as smooth and as bright as the wave.

"You still don't want to leave?" Sha Man asked.

"Why would I want to leave?" Beef Soup said, "This chest is warm and comfortable."

"Don't you want to see your Jiu Ge?" Sha Man said.

Beef Soup said, "If I don't come back, sooner or later he'll catch up with me. I'm in no hurry at all."

Suddenly she stood up. In the dark of the night, her naked body seemed to be glowing. She happened to stand in front of Honest Monk.

Winking at him, she asked, "How long has it been since Monk saw a naked woman?"

Honest Monk hung his head low. "Seems like ... seems like it has been several hundred years," he stammered.

Beef Soup laughed and said, "Buddhists pay particular attention to color in the eye, but no color in the heart; why Monk does not dare to look at me?"

"Monk's spiritual cultivation is still not enough," Honest Monk replied.

Beef Soup said, "Could it be that there is a ghost in Monk's heart?"

"There is a little," Honest Monk replied.

Beef Soup giggled. Suddenly she plopped her naked butts on Honest Monk's bosom; she said, "Sitting in Monk's bosom is much more comfortable than lying in a chest."

Continuous sweats appeared on Honest Monk's head. Of course he knew that she was deliberately provoking him, so that this small boat could not move fast. If she did not come back, Gong Jiu would definitely turn around to pursue them.

Unfortunately, although Honest Monk understood the situation, he was totally helpless. Not only he did not dare to put out his hand to push her, he practically did not have the courage to move.

Beef Soup rolled her eyes. She suddenly asked, "How long has it been since Monk touched a woman?"

"I ... I don't know," Honest Monk replied.

"You don't know, or you don't remember?" Beef Soup asked.

"I ... I don't remember," Honest Monk replied.

Beef Soup laughed. "I am sure Monk don't even remember what it feels like to touch a woman," she said, "Let me remind you."

She suddenly grabbed Honest Monk's hand ...

Honest Monk was so scared that it looked like he was about to scream. Fortunately, right this moment a hand suddenly reached out, grabbed Beef Soup's wrist, and flung her away. Beef Soup's body flew. 'Splosh!' she landed in the water.

Lu Xiaofeng clapped his hands and said, "Cut the mooring ropes. Whether she wants to get on it or not, it's none of our business."

Xiao Yu said, "But if she wants to drown herself, what do we do?"

"We can only watch," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Xiao Yu said sweetly, "Good plan, good idea."

To deal with a woman like Beef Soup, it was indeed the best idea.

Beef Soup did not stop jumping around in the water; she bawled out at the top of her lungs, "Lu Xiaofeng, you b@stard! There will come a day I am going to chop you and cook you for a meal!"

Chapter 15 – Saving people for the sake of loyalty

She was cursing loudly, but Lu Xiaofeng did not hear her, not even one word.

Honest Monk wiped his sweats; he sighed and said with a bitter laugh, "Apparently, this is called the natural treatment."

'Boom!' suddenly the wave crashed onto the small boat, the stars in the sky disappeared rapidly behind black clouds. Was there a storm coming in?

The sea was getting darker, the small boat rocked more violently. When the stars disappeared completely, they could not even distinguish direction.

Honest Monk gripped the edge of the boat tightly with both hands, blood has been drained from his face; he did not stop mumbling, "What should we do? Monk is afraid to even look at the water in the bath tub, I don't even dare to take a bath."

Xiao Yu chuckled. "Turns out ..." she started. But before she could finish, the crashing wave hit her heavily, throwing her to the floor of the boat.

Lu Xiaofeng rushed to hold the rudder; but even if he could control the rudder, what good would it do, since he could not even tell direction?

Honest Monk sighed. With a bitter laugh he said, "Now Monk finally

understands.”

“Understand what?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk replied, “Understand why Gong Jiu readily agreed to your conditions.” He sighed again before continuing, “That kid must have figured out early on that there would be a storm at the sea; he already knew that we won’t pass this hurdle.”

Lu Xiaofeng said, “Don’t forget that his little sister is also on a small boat; her boat is no bigger than ours.”

Honest Monk said, “Don’t forget that that girl is a fox-spirit, while we are a bunch of land-dwellers.”

Lu Xiaofeng was silent. He could not help sighing as well, “If the Old Fox is here, that would be nice,” he said.

“Who is the Old Fox?” Honest Monk asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, “He can’t be considered anybody special, but if in this world there were 300 ways to prevent a boat from capsizing, he would know at least 299 of them.”

Suddenly they heard someone said, “I know all 300 ways.”

One of the plank of the small boat suddenly raised up, a head appeared from below; a head full of ash grey hair, but his eyes were deep blue like

the seawater.

"The Old Fox!" Lu Xiaofeng cried out, "How come you are not dead yet?"

The Old Fox winked and said, "Have you seen a fish drowned in the water?"

"No," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Fish may die in the water, but definitely not from drowning.

The Old Fox laughed and said, "On land, I am an old fox; in the water, I am a fish."

"What kind of fish?" Xiao Yu asked.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "An old turtle, of course!" he said. [Orig. 甲鱼 jia yu, lit. shell/shield/armor fish.]

The storm was over.

No matter how small the boat, no matter how big the storm, with an expert at the helms, surely it would go over it.

Old Fox's hand was as steady as a rock.

"These days, where did you hide?"

"In the water, of course," the Old Fox replied.

If one can hide under water, it was indeed the safest place.

"What did you eat?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Big fish eats small fish, old fish eats big fish."

The nutrition of raw fish far surpasses simmer-fried fish, steamed fish or deep-fried fish. Therefore, his hand was still very steady, his physical strength had not disappeared.

"How did you get to this boat?"

"I saw this boat is loaded with fresh water, so I knew it was going to sail away." He laughed, a very proud laugh, "I also knew that if it was not an emergency, nobody would move the lifeboat."

Xiao Yu had been listening all along. Now she could not help sighing and said, "Apparently this man is indeed an old fox."

Honest Monk also could not help sighing and said, "There will come a day, you will also turn into an old fox."

Xiao Yu stared at him. She suddenly asked, "You really never take a

bath?"

"Who said that?" Honest Monk asked.

"You said it yourself just now," Xiao Yu said, "You said you are afraid to look at water, how can you take a bath?"

"I am clean," Honest Monk said.

The setting sun faded away.

The Old Fox's eyes were just as exciting as the sunset.

"Where are we heading?"

"Naturally the Old Fox is returning to the Fox Den."

He laughed even more delightedly, because he knew that with him on the helm, even if other people did not want to go, they simply could not refuse.

"What kind of place is the Fox Den?"

"It's the kind of place where, if you have been there once, you will want to go back."

"Have you been there?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. His eyes were also shining.

In that low and dark building, there were always rooms lost in boundless mists of smoke; with rough and blunt men, downing cup after cup of strong wine, strong enough to make them shed their tears; and then there were those bathrooms, with wooden partition full of holes ...

For an unknown reason, when he thought about those things, there was an unspeakable warmth in his heart.

Narrowing his eyes, the Old Fox stared at him. "Is your heart the same as mine, you want to come back?" he asked.

Lu Xiaofeng could not deny. "A little bit," he said.

The Old Fox said, "Only a little bit, or you are dying to come back?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "I am dying to come back," he said.

The Old Fox chuckled. Casually he pointed forward and said, "Do you know what that is?"

Lu Xiaofeng turned his head around. He saw land. Great and lovely land, finally they were back.

There is no doubt that they would be back, because their faith and courage had not disappeared.

The Old Fox was as excited as a little child.

This coast, the sandy beach, even that piece of rock, he was very familiar with.

No matter where he was, as long as he closed his eyes, he could see everything clearly.

Yet as soon as he came ashore, he was stunned. The coast, the sandy beach, the rock, had not changed. But his Fox Den had.

The low, shabby single-story building has changed beyond recognition. The windows have snow-white paper covering, there was no more rough and blunt laughter coming from the inside. His Fox Den has unexpectedly turned into a tomb.

Lu Xiaofeng was also taken by surprise. He could not help asking, "Are you sure you did not land on the wrong place?"

Actually, he should have known that the Old Fox can't possibly land on the wrong place. In the world, there has never been any fox who cannot find its way back to its den.

But then, in the world there is nothing that cannot change; including a fox den.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "When you left, who was in charge of the Fox

Den?"

Xiao Yu interrupted, "When the old fox is out, the mother fox is naturally in charge of the fox den."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "I get it," he said.

"You get what?" the Old Fox asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "That mother fox of yours must be a fox-spirit too. Fox-spirits do not like to be a widow too long, she must have thought that you were buried at the bottom of the sea, so most likely your Fox Den now has a new master."

With a cold laugh the Old Fox said, "Whoever dare to take that fox-spirit, I really admire his guts."

They were standing behind the big rock, and were able to see the Fox Den's newly painted front door.

The door suddenly opened, a man swaggered out. He had hawk nose and high cheekbones, his eyes like eagle.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed and said, "Other people perhaps won't dare, but this man definitely dare."

"You know him?" the Old Fox asked.

"Not only I know him," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "I also know that there are very few things in the world that he does not dare to do."

"Who is he?" the Old Fox asked.

"Ying Yan Laoqi, the Zongpiaobazi [see chapter 1] of the Twelve-Dock Alliance," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

The Old Fox's countenance changed a little.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I won't be surprised if he seized anybody's den, but I am surprised that he came here."

"Why don't you go and ask him?" Xiao Yu said.

"This is my territory," the Old Fox said, "I'll go and ask him."

He left as soon as he said he would go. As soon as he rounded the big rock, Ying Yan Laoqi's bright, shining eyes were already staring at him.

The Old Fox looked at him. His eyes narrowed.

Ying Yan Laoqi suddenly said, "Hey, come here."

"I am indeed going there," the Old Fox said.

Ying Yan Laoqi pointed to the small boat and asked, "Is that boat

yours?"

"At first it wasn't, but now it is," the Old Fox replied.

"Aren't there four, five people on the boat?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

"Mm," the Old Fox mumbled.

"Where are the others?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

Grinning, the Old Fox asked, "Are you an officer from the yamen?"

Ying Yan Laoqi shook his head.

The Old Fox said, "Do you know who was originally in charge in this place?"

Ying Yan Laoqi shook his head. "Who?" he asked.

The Old Fox pointed to his own nose, "Me," he said.

"You are the Old Fox?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

The Old Fox laughed. He said, "Therefore, I should be the one doing the questioning, not you."

And then he started the interrogation. "Who are you? What are you doing here? Altogether, how many of you? Where are the others?"

Ying Yan Laoqi coldly said, "Why don't you turn around to see?"

When the Old Fox looked back, he saw two men, clad in black tight clothes, were already standing noiselessly behind his back. Before he even turned around, these two men had moved in lightning speed, trussing his body up.

With a cold laugh Ying Yan Laoqi said, "Now, who should do the questioning?"

With a bitter smile the Old Fox replied, "You."

With a cold laugh Ying Yan Laoqi turned around, and entered the door in large strides. "Bring him in," he said.

'Bang!' the door was shut.

The two men in black brought the Old Fox in. There were moving shadows on the corners, as well as on the roof ridges. At least seven, eight similarly-dressed-in-black men were guarding and lying in ambush all around the Fox Den.

From the distance came the sound of hoot beats, there were twenty some riders going back and forth patrolling the area; surprisingly, they were dressed in the uniform of the seven-pin rank military officer.

Lu Xiaofeng frowned. "Since when did Hu Laoqi [lit. Ol' Hu the seventh] show such a grand style like this?" he mumbled to himself.

Those two men who apprehended the Old Fox just now had swift footwork, the way they move was also very fast.

Those who lay in ambush on the roof ridges and behind the corners also had martial art skill not inferior to these two; all these people could be considered top-ranking martial art experts.

The number of people who were able to employ these many martial art experts as security guards was really a few; Ying Yan Laoqi actually did not have this kind of pomp.

From among the riders patrolling in the distance, suddenly one galloped his horse over. Promptly from behind the corner of the building a man in black stepped out to meet him.

Immediately the rider dismounted and bowed to pay his respect.

Although he was wearing a seven-pin rank military officer uniform, he was very respectful toward this man in black, as if he was in the presence of his immediate supervisor.

Xiao Yu said, "It appears not only he has a grand style, his subordinates' style is not shabby either."

Sha Man said, "These men in black are definitely not Twelve-Dock Alliance people."

"How do you know?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Sha Man said, "I have heard about the Twelve-Dock Alliance. Although it is not a den of robbers, but it is not a good place either."

"Are you saying that those friends in black are good people?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Actually, he also knew in his heart that these people were not under Twelve-Dock Alliance. Twelve-Dock Alliance had never had dealings with government officials.

But right now he was in a nasty mood, he just wanted to find someone to fight. Oftentimes it was an effective way to stabilize his emotions.

Yet Sha Man ignored him.

Lu Xiaofeng pinched her nose playfully and said, "How did you suddenly become mute?"

Sha Man deliberately put on a straight face. "What do you want me to say?" she said.

Lu Xiaofeng pinched her cheek. "I know that you must have seen what kind of people they are."

"Naturally they are not good people," Sha Man said.

"Why not?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because you said so," Sha Man replied.

"So you'll listen to whatever I say?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"If I don't listen to you, whom should I listen to?" Sha Man said.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. Suddenly he put his arms around her waist and planted a kiss on her lips.

Sha Man could not maintain her straight face much longer. Her entire body turned into jelly in his arms.

Xiao Yu sighed. "Can you two do me a favor?" she said, "If you want to display some affection, you should at least look at the time, look at the place."

Sha Man said, "If you cannot stand watching, I can have him kiss you as well."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "Too bad my mouth is busy right now."

Indeed their mouths were very busy, while on the other side, the two

men's mouths were not idle either.

The man wearing seven-pin rank uniform, the military officer whose body was clad in shining armor, has been bowing respectfully while talking to the man clad in black. His voice was very low, his expression was grave yet respectful, as if he was reporting a top-secret military intelligence.

The man in black, on the other hand, looked a little impatient; he already waved his hand to dismiss the officer.

Sha Man said in low voice, "This man must be a Tian Long Nan Zong [lit. celestial dragon southern school] disciple."

"Did you see that?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Sha Man said, "Tian Long Nan Zong's qinggong is very particular. The two men who seized the Old Fox just now were also using Tian Long Nan Zong's unique qinna [grab and capture, grappling] technique. That's why I said they are definitely not Twelve-Dock Alliance people."

This time Lu Xiaofeng was silent, but Xiao Yu asked, "Why?"

Sha Man said, "Tian Long Nan Zong's first disciple is a castrate [orig. 天阉 – heaven castrate. I don't understand the 'heaven' part, perhaps birth defect?]; hence he went all out and purified himself to become a eunuch in the Palace. I heard for the last few years he grew to be very powerful, hence he recommended his younger martial brothers to enter the Palace. As a result, among the Tian Long Nan Zong disciples, nine out of ten are

internal Imperial Bodyguards.”

“And thus even these military officers, when they see them, they have to bow their heads?” Xiao Yu asked.

“Even those with higher rank, when they see them, they would bow their heads,” Sha Man said.

“But why did these internal Imperial Bodyguards come here?” Xiao Yu asked, “How could they become Ying Yan Laoqi’s subordinates?”

Sha Man intentionally provoked her, “Why don’t you go and ask him yourself?” she said.

Xiao Yu blinked. “If Miss Man really wants me to go, I’ll go,” she said.

She did not go.

Because the military officer, who all along had his head down, suddenly raised his head up; while the man in black, who all along had been haughty, suddenly hung his head down.

Lu Xiaofeng seemed to see the flicker of a blade in the military officer’s hand as it penetrated the man in black’s waist. The men in black’s body immediately slumped, but the military officer propped him up, and brought him toward the Fox Den. His face was still wearing a smile, while his mouth was still busy talking; too bad the man in black already could not hear him.

From Lu Xiaofeng's point of view, he could see the clothes around the soft spot underneath the man in black's ribs was already red with blood.

That spot was a fatal spot on human's body. The blade was vicious and accurate.

A lowly seven-pin rank military officer, how could he have such a fast blade? Why would he kill an internal Imperial Bodyguard?

Who were these people in the Fox Den? What was their secret?

Lu Xiaofeng relaxed his embrace on Sha Man. Xiao Yu was not watching them either.

What was happening before their very eyes this moment was not only exciting, but very mysterious as well; it had completely captured their attention.

Right now, the military officer had almost reached Fox Den's back door. The other riders quietly urged their horses to come over.

From behind the corner another man in black appeared. The military officer seemed to greet him. It was not clear what he was saying, but the man in black suddenly turned around and fled in big strides. Another flicker of blade appeared in the military officer's hand as he pierced the man's waist.

The blade was even more accurate, even faster; with so much as a grunt the man in black collapsed to the ground.

It seemed that not only this seven-pin rank military officer was a martial art master, his experience in assassination was very rich.

But finally he reached a restricted area, the guards lying ambush all around the building were alerted. A dozen or so men in similar black clothing appeared, with unsheathed weapons in their hands.

The rest of the riders, which were still some distant away, suddenly whipped their mounts to rush over. The riders on the front row had long spears and long halberds in their hands; their horsemanship was superb, evidently these men were seasoned veterans of the battlefields. The riders on the back row were using short weapons commonly seen in Jianghu, some even uncovered secret projectile sacks hanging from their waist.

The military officer already flung the man in black's dead body away and said in stern voice, "We receive arrest order from the Prince, anybody dare to resist will be kill without questioning."

Among the men in black, someone also said in stern voice, "We are the Prince's Imperial Bodyguards; what kind of 'thing' are you?"

By the time he finished speaking, the riders already charged. The front row's spears and halberds fluttered, the power was incredible. The riders on the back row suddenly leaped up from their saddle, looking for an opportunity to charge into the Fox Den. Each and every one's qinggong was not weak, their secret projectiles were even more vicious. Tian Long

Nan Zong was also known for their qinggong and secret projectiles. Hence both sides were opposing each other with equal harshness, the way they made their moves was without mercy.

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbstruck, he really did not understand what was going on. But he has seen one thing.

-- Tian Long Nan Zong's martial art was not as superior as the hearsay in Jianghu. Those men wearing seven-pin rank military officer were, on the other hand, first-class martial art experts.

Because in that split second, five or six of the men in black already fell, three or four windows of the Fox Den have already broken, and seven or eight men have already charged in.

The military officer with a blade in his hand who had just killed two men in black, in another split second had already killed two more. He was the first one to break into Fox Den.

Watching this man kill, Lu Xiaofeng remembered the cook in his house. When he was little, he often sneaked into the kitchen, just to watch the cook peeled cucumber or chopped Chinese cabbage.

The way this man killed was just like the cook chopped the melon and sliced the vegetables. His blade never missed.

-- Who were inside the building?

At least there were the Old Fox and Ying Yan Laoqi. Lu Xiaofeng could

not say that they were not his friends.

-- Friends. What a lovely word. Can a man be without any friend?

Cannot.

-- Can a man watch their friends being chopped off like cucumber and Chinese cabbage?

Cannot.

-- Can a man hear his friends' miserable cry and pretend that he did not hear anything?

Cannot.

At least not Lu Xiaofeng.

He had heard the Old Fox' miserable cry, a very strange kind of cry, like a shrill cry of a little girl being raped.

A very, very young little girl.

Lu Xiaofeng really wanted to pretend that he did not hear it. But he could not.

Sha Man stared at him. She suddenly asked, "Is the Old Fox your friend

or not?"

"He is not," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Do you want to save him or not?" Sha man asked again.

"I don't want to," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

He really did not want to, because in all honesty he did not have any confidence that he would be able to deal with that military officer who actually was not a military officer.

But he had already rushed out.

If there is pain in your heart and you get drunk, would you be able to forget?

No!

-- Why?

Because when your head is clear, you will feel more painful.

-- Therefore, getting drunk won't do you any good.

Absolutely not.

-- So why do you want to get drunk?

I don't know.

Why is a man always had to do things he did not want to do?

I don't know.

The situation inside the building was very tragic. Those high and mighty men in black, most of them had fallen by now, some were lying in pools of their own blood, some were hanging on window frames like dead fish. All the military officers' blades were bloody.

Three blood-stained blades protruded from the Old Fox's neck, four more blades stuck on Ying Yan Laoqi's throat. When the men in black saw Lu Xiaofeng bursting in, it was as if they saw a savior dropping in from the Heaven. But when the military officers saw him bursting in, they saw him like a bird that foolishly walks straight into the trap.

Only Lu Xiaofeng knew which one he really was.

-- Lu Xiaofeng was Lu Xiaofeng. A man that cannot be considered too good, but cannot be considered too bad either. Sometimes he was very clever, sometimes he was very stupid. Sometimes very impulsive, sometimes very calm.

As soon as he entered the building, he suddenly became very calm.

Because he was, after all, here to save lives, not to deliver his own life.

First thing Lu Xiaofeng did was to prepare a way out for himself.

-- Because if he could not save anyone, he must save himself first.

The military officers looked at him with cold gaze.

But he was smiling, a polite and courteous smile, while with a cupped fist he said, "Gentlemen spent so much energy, coming from afar, is it to arrest these two men?"

Nobody answered, nobody reacted.

"What crime did they commit?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Still nobody answered, nobody reacted.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt his stomach contracting, just like after he was dead drunk, early the next morning someone kicked him in the stomach.

The people lying on pools of blood suddenly stood up, the dead fish hanging on window frames suddenly became lively dragons and animated tigers.

Lu Xiaofeng had become a fish, a fish caught in the net.

When a fish fell into the net, it may struggle, it may fight to get out of the net.

Lu Xiaofeng was not a fish; therefore, he did not move at all.

-- As soon as he moved, the seven blades resting on chest and throat would immediately take his life.

-- How could he move?

He suddenly became even calmer. He stood up calmly; calm like a sturdy mountain.

In time of crisis, Lu Xiaofeng was able to stay calm. But someone else was not able to.

-- Who?

Sha Man.

Lu Xiaofeng has been inside for a long time, why hasn't he come out?

Sha Man had seen the men in black and the Imperial Bodyguards' martial art skill. She believed that Lu Xiaofeng could definitely overcome them.

-- However, why hasn't Lu Xiaofeng come out?

He must have met something. But what is it?

'What' can have a lot of explanations.

To Sha Man who was in love, 'what' can only mean one thing: a crisis.

Therefore, she could not be calm.

She stood up and was about to charge inside. But there was someone who did not want her to rush in.

-- Who?

Honest Monk.

So, Honest Monk caught Sha Man's sleeve.

Of course Sha Man would never let Honest Monk grabbed her sleeve. Therefore, Honest Monk was forced to block in front of Sha Man.

"Why do you stop me?" Sha Man asked.

"It isn't me who's stopping you," Honest Monk said.

Pointing to Honest Monk, Sha Man said, "Are you saying that the

person standing in front of me is not you?"

"This is only my body," Honest Monk said.

"You mean, someone wanted you to stop me?" Sha Man asked.

Honest Monk nodded.

"Who?" Sha Man asked.

"Lu Xiaofeng," Honest Monk replied.

"I don't understand," Sha Man said, "When did he tell you to stop me?"

"He did not tell me to stop you at all," Honest Monk said.

Sha Man was stunned. She stared blankly at Honest Monk.

"I know that he definitely does not wish you to come in," Honest Monk said.

"Why?" Sha Man asked.

"Because in there, they must be talking about a top secret matter," Honest Monk replied.

"How do you know?" Sha Man asked.

"I just know," Honest Monk replied.

Sha Man said, "What if ..."

"Don't worry," Honest Monk cut her off, "I guarantee that Lu Xiaofeng will not be in danger at all."

Was Lu Xiaofeng really not in danger? Could it be that the seven blades threatening his chest and throat were not real blades?

The blades were naturally real blades. But before long, the blades on Lu Xiaofeng's chest and throat were suddenly withdrawn.

Ying Yan Laoqi suddenly roared in laughter, "Lu Xiaofeng is indeed Lu Xiaofeng," he said, "In the most dangerous situation, he's still this calm."

The Old Fox also laughed and said, "Lu Xiaofeng is calm under water, he is even calmer on dry land. My utmost admiration!"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "The two gentlemen's joke is a bit too much. If I wasn't calm, wouldn't I lose my life under your blades early on?"

Ying Yan Laoqi said, "If we didn't do it, they would not believe in Lu Xiaofeng's unique skill. The situation is urgent, please extend much forgiveness."

"Why do they have to believe in my skill?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because I need you to do me a favor," Ying Yan Laoqi replied.

"Does the favor require something like this?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Ying Yan Laoqi said, "This matter is not only bizarre, it is very mysterious. Not only mysterious, it is brimming with crises."

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"This matter involves thirty-five million taels worth of gold, pearls and jewels," Ying Yan Laoqi said.

"And what else?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"And a hundred and three astute, capable and experienced Wulin martial art masters, all disappeared in one night," Ying Yan Laoqi said.

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes already grew big, because such a huge amount of treasure, so many Wulin masters, unexpectedly disappeared in one night. This matter must be very mysterious, very dangerous, but must also be very interesting.

Mysterious, dangerous, interesting. Only one of these three, Lu Xiaofeng would be attracted to it; not to mention there were all three?

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng quietly listened to Ying Yan Laoqi narrating the entire incident.

At the end, Ying Yan Laoqi added something, "This matter not only concerns the Central Plains' thirteen biggest escort agencies' survival, as well as their honor and disgrace, there are also at least seventy or eighty distinguished men of Jianghu that very soon would have their families bankrupt, ruined and have their reputation swept away."

Lu Xiaofeng listened to the entire story quietly; he did not say a single word. All around him, nobody made any noise; not the least bit of noise.

Because they were afraid that a least bit of noise would disturb Lu Xiaofeng's concentration.

Therefore, all of them were holding their breath and did not move, they all looked at this four-eyebrowed Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at Ying Yan Laoqi, "Three teams investigated this matter without any result?" he asked.

"No," Ying Yan Laoqi replied, "Not the least bit."

"Not even anything remotely suspicious?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"There was something suspicious," Ying Yan Laoqi replied, "Just the morning of the day before this thing happened, there was a group of carpenters passing through that place, transporting several large carts of wood. They said it was to make Buddha statues and wooden fish."

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes shone brighter. "Buddha statues and wooden fish?" he pursued.

"That's right," Ying Yan Laoqi replied.

"Why didn't you pursue the trail?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"We did," Ying Yan Laoqi replied, "That night this group of men left. Furthermore, we found out that they were Taiping Wangfu's [Prince's mansion] carpenters. There was not the least bit of suspicion there."

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Lu Xiaofeng's four eyebrows seemed to gather together. It was his appearance when he was very deep in thought.

Lu Xiaofeng raised his head up, he looked at the men in black and the military officers surrounding them. "Are these gentlemen handling this case?" he asked Ying Yan Laoqi.

"That's right," Ying Yan Laoqi replied, "If further investigation did not come up with anything, we have only one way to go."

"Dead end," the Old Fox said.

"What do you have to do with this matter?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"At first, not the least bit," the Old Fox replied, "Too bad someone suddenly came to my Fox Den."

"Who?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"You," the Old Fox replied.

"Me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Old Fox said, "Because I did not die, Ying Yan Laoqi deduced that you must be alive as well; therefore, we have been waiting for you here for five days."

"Your wait is over," Lu Xiaofeng said.

The wait was over, but what's the use?

The fifteenth day of the sixth month was the deadline set by Prince Taiping's Heir Apparent. Today was already the fourteenth day of the sixth month; hence Ying Yan Laoqi's countenance did not look any better.

"Is Prince Taiping's Heir Apparent a person who can listen to reason?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Absolutely," Ying Yan Laoqi replied.

"In that case," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Tell him that someone has seen one of those hundred and three people, moreover, he has also seen the missing treasure."

Everybody looked at Lu Xiaofeng's face with wide eyes. Ying Yan Laoqi's eyes were the biggest.

"Is that true?" It was everybody's question with different mouths, same voice. There was excitement, but also nervousness in their voices.

"After all, Lu Xiaofeng is Lu Xiaofeng!"

It was Ying Yan Laoqi's gasp of admiration.

He did not know that to see those more than a hundred Buddha statues, Lu Xiaofeng had gone through countless dangers, storms and perilous situations.

Lu Xiaofeng nearly died in the ocean. Lu Xiaofeng nearly died because of a sentence spoken by Beef Soup. Lu Xiaofeng was almost killed by Minister He.

But he managed to turn peril into safety, not only that, he managed to see those wooden fish in that secret room, and the treasure inside the wooden fish, plus the 'Titan Hawk' Ge Tong, who 'lived inside the Buddha statue'.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly remembered when he was knocked down by the storm and fell into the sea, he saw some kind of fish.

-- Wooden fish.

And then the Buddha statue he sat on.

Thereupon Lu Xiaofeng said to the Old Fox, "You were the one transporting those things."

Naturally the Old Fox was not the only one being shocked.

-- There were also Ying Yan Laoqi and those men in black and the military officers.

They suddenly surrounded the Old Fox.

The Old Fox wanted let out a wry laugh, but he could not even put out a bleak smile.

"But you did not know the inside story at all," Lu Xiaofeng continued.

The Old Fox let out a long sigh.

"Where are those things now?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

"Do you trust me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Ying Yan Laoqi said, "As soon as this case broke out, I immediately thought that only you can solve it, hence I went out to look for you. Just think, do I trust you?"

"Very well," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Go tell Prince Taiping's Heir Apparent, ask him to give you fifteen more days allowance. In fifteen days, I will definitely bring everything back to you."

"Can I go with you?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

"You can't," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Why?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

"Because that place is really too dangerous," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Lu Xiaofeng would never let anybody else risk danger. In time of crisis, he could only dash on bravely with no thought of personal safety to solve the problem. This is Lu Xiaofeng's character.

Ying Yan Laoqi understood Lu Xiaofeng's character. Hence he did not insist.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "And now I need a big ship, and the Old Fox's help."

The Old Fox suddenly felt very happy.

Even Ying Yan Laoqi and the others were not allowed to participate in this adventure, yet he, the Old Fox, could. Wouldn't it be a great pleasure in one's time on earth?

Chapter 16 – Back on the Island

The Old Fox's happiness did not last very long.

Because when they reached the place where they met the storm last time, Lu Xiaofeng got onto the little boat alone, bringing a bottle of fresh water and a pouch of dry rations, and rowed the boat away.

This time they did not meet any storm. Lu Xiaofeng decided to go alone, letting the little boat drifted on the wave.

He remembered when he was on the island, the little old man told him, "It was also because of this warm current that you could come here."

Therefore, he continually put his hand into the water to feel the water temperature.

He had already tested the water 276 times, but the water was still cold, not warm at all.

He started to get anxious.

He started to doubt whether he could drift to the island following the current.

He started to regret, regretting the fact that he repeatedly forbade Sha Man from coming with him.

If Sha Man were by his side, why would he care about drifting on the current? Why would he care about where they were drifting? It would be best if they could drift to the end of the world, drift to a blessed country, drift to the legendary Penglai[1], the island of the immortals.

He longed to have Sha Man by his side.

The sun was so bright, the sea was so blue, the waves rocked the boat up and down, occasionally rippled into a flash of silver.

If Sha Man was by his side, this would be a very beautiful setting!

Sha Man! Sha Man! Did he really love Sha Man?

He laughed.

By this time, has the Old Fox's ship returned to port?

Sha Man was on the Old Fox's ship. Was she thinking about him too? Did she tell Xiao Yu that she missed him? Or probably she was joking around with Honest Monk?

Thinking about Honest Monk, Lu Xiaofeng sat up immediately.

What if Honest Monk was not really honest?

'Slap! Slap!' It was the sound of Lu Xiaofeng slapping himself left and right.

Could Honest Monk be dishonest? Perhaps he would swindle other people, but could Lu Xiaofeng doubt him? Didn't he rescue Lu Xiaofeng and Sha Man?

Lu Xiaofeng raised his palm again, ready to give himself two more slaps, when suddenly he stopped his hand midair.

Because he saw a faint grey small dot ahead.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart jumped. Was that the island he went last time?

Stars. The sky was full of stars. Twinkling stars. Bright and clear stars. Gazing at stars from the ocean was indeed a very pleasant thing.

Of course, if Sha Man was around, it would be even better.

However, Lu Xiaofeng had no regret at all.

Because, before sunrise, he had to be clear about one thing.

One thing pertaining to Yue Yang, pertaining to the Little Old Man, pertaining to Gong Jiu, pertaining to Beef Soup, pertaining to the missing treasure, pertaining to the 103 missing Wulin's martial art masters.

When he was approaching the edge of solution to a problem, Lu Xiaofeng's action has always been that of a man of character.

-- The issue at hand, he could not afford to put down.

-- The most important thing was: he was able to be unruffled by sentiment, he was able to relinquish love.

It was the character of a real hero.

In the face of the enemy, if one was still wishy-washy, still reluctant to leave feelings and romantic love behind, one would definitely suffer defeat in the hands of the enemy.

Lu Xiaofeng had been undefeated.

Lu Xiaofeng would only talk about love when it's time to talk about love. He only made love when it's time to make love.

And now it's time to analyze the situation of the enemy.

Therefore, although Sha Man was not by his side, Lu Xiaofeng did not have any regret.

He thought about the 103 missing people.

These 103 people must be on the island; however, they must have lost

their ability to move.

When one can only drink a spoon of beef soup every day, can their hands and feet still have the strength to move?

Beef Soup treated them like that, for what reason?

Why didn't she just go ahead and kill them?

Letting them struggling on whilst at the death's door, what was her purpose?

He thought about that thirty-five million taels worth of gold, pearls and jewels.

What a huge sum!

Such a big robbery!

It was very clear that the mastermind behind this heist must be the Little Old Man.

Yue Yang was just a small pawn whose role was to escort the transport of the treasure. In his robbery, he was not a significant player.

There were only two significant players.

The Little Old Man and Gong Jiu.

The Little Old Man was the mastermind, Gong Jiu was the operator.

Relying on the cloud of martial art masters on the island, robbing this treasure was not a difficult matter at all.

However, the most important issue was not that.

The most important issue was: who killed Cui Cheng?

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly recalled something.

Something that the Little Old Man said.

-- There was only one way to kill.

-- After the killing, not only the killer must be able to get away, he must not leave any trace at all. Therefore, although there are many tools that can be used in murder, there is absolutely only one proper method to do it.

-- This not only required great skill, it also required an extremely precise planning, enormous intelligence and great patience.

Was the Little Old Man Cui Cheng's killer?

He couldn't be.

The Little Old Man did not need to act personally.

Was it Gong Jiu?

He ought to be. But ... how did he kill Cui Cheng?

Outside Cui Cheng's secret room, there were five layers of tightly guarded iron gates. Those with free access to his room were only Cheng Zhong and Xiao Hongzu.

Did Gong Jiu bribe Cheng Zhong and Xiao Hongzu?

It was possible.

But why did when they enter the secret room, Cheng Zhong and Xiao Hongzu were already dead?

They couldn't possibly kill themselves!

Moreover, the four walls of the room were blocks of granite. Not only the iron doors were guarded day and night, they were fitted with large padlocks manufactured by famous craftsmen.

Such a tight security, who could enter and kill?

Even the Little Old Man could not enter!

Only one kind of men can go in!

The invisible men!

That's right, an invisible man!

Lu Xiaofeng was excited! He knew that only the Little Old Man knew how these people can be invisible. Therefore, his first order of business tomorrow morning was to find the Little Old Man.

Right now, he only needed plenty of sleep.

The morning sun was rising.

Sunshine pierced Lu Xiaofeng's eyes. He stood up, stretched out his muscles and bones, and felt that he had slept very well last night. This morning he was in great spirits.

He started by walking toward the vine-covered cliff. Pushing aside the vines, he entered the small path, and walked along the grassy ground.

Green grass, running water, everything was the same as the last time. Except one.

-- There was no Yue Yang meeting him this time. Not only there was no

Yue Yang, he did not see not even a human shadow.

Quiet. Extraordinarily quiet.

Amidst the gurgling sound of water, Lu Xiaofeng could almost hear the sound of the grass growing and the flowers blooming.

"Quiet enough to hear the sound of the grass growing and the flowers blooming, isn't it?"

Lu Xiaofeng jumped in fright.

He turned around and saw the person speaking.

Still with a round face, half-bald head, his face still had that kind of kind and gentle smile, his body still wore that kind of high-quality clothing.

-- The Little Old Man.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at the Little Old Man and said with a smile, "Do you always appear abruptly like that?"

The Little Old Man said, "Last time you were on this island and saw all those things; do you think that was very strange?"

"Extremely strange," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Isn't this island very mysterious?" the Little Old Man asked.

"Very mysterious," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"I am the master of this island," the Little Old Man said.

"Therefore," Lu Xiaofeng said, "By rights, you should be able to reveal the mystery?"

"Absolutely right," the Little Old Man replied.

"This time I am back on the island, do you know what my purpose is?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Of course I do," the Little Old Man replied, "You have a lot of questions, and you need me to give you answers."

"Will you give me the answers?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"What do you think?" the Little Old Man asked.

"You will," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Why?" the Little Old Man asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Based on your martial art skill, based on your intelligence, you should not need to conceal anything."

"You are very right," the Little Old Man said, "But I also have another hope."

"What hope?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I hope this time you come back here to tell me one thing," the Little Old Man said.

"What is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"That you agree to join me in this line of business," the Little Old Man replied.

"Then I'll have to disappoint you," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I know," the Little Old Man said.

"How do you know?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Little Old Man said, "Because you come back alone."

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

The Little Old Man said, "If you were willing to join me in this business, you would bring Sha Man back. But you did not." With a slight disappointment on his face, he continued, "I hope that my

disappointment is temporary.”

“In regard to your disappointment,” Lu Xiaofeng said, “I am so sorry that I cannot give you any promises.”

The Little Old Man nodded, “I know,” he said.

“You do?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Little Old Man said, “Because you are not someone else, you are Lu Xiaofeng. Lu Xiaofeng always put his promise in the highest regard.”

In his heart Lu Xiaofeng was thrilled. If it were some other people appreciating him, he would not give it too much thought. But this incomparably extraordinary talent, the Little Old Man, said those words, how could Lu Xiaofeng not be happy?

The Little Old Man said, “You were able to escape Gong Jiu’s attack on the ship, I believe that your intelligent is absolutely higher than mine. I am convinced that in the case of those stolen treasure, you must already have a lot of clues.”

“I only know one thing,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“Which one?” the Little Old Man asked.

“That you are the mastermind behind this heist,” Lu Xiaofeng replied, “Those missing treasures and the missing people are all on this island.”

"You're only half-right," the Little Old Man said.

"Which half?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"The first half," the Little Old Man replied.

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked. "You mean, treasures and people are no longer on the island?" he said.

"That's right," the Little Old Man said.

"Gong Jiu already removed the treasures and the people back?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Little Old Man said, "People, Gong Jiu has other ideas. Treasures, he can always spend it."

"How can one person spend that much?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Not one person, a lot of persons," the Little Old Man replied.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly realized, "No wonder there is no one remains in here," he said, "Turns out they all left to spend the money."

"Therefore," the Little Old Man said, "In my mind, my ideal successor, there is only one."

"Who?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"You!" the Little Old Man said.

"Why only me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The Little Old Man replied, "Because they all won't be content with solitude. People who love to eat, to drink, to play and to make commotion are very easy to fall under other people's control."

"Based on what you said," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Aren't those people ideal?"

"They are," the Little Old Man replied, "But I also like solitude."

"Because you can't find people who meet your work ethic and be the leader of your people?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"And that's why I like you very much," the Little Old Man said.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled, but he did not respond.

"Concerning this heist, what questions do you have for me?" the Little Old Man asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Based on your manpower and their martial art skills, I know that stealing these treasures was a piece of cake. Therefore, I only

have one question I don't have the answer."

"What problem?" the Little Old Man asked.

"Cui Cheng's death," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

The Little Old Man laughed and said, "Do you remember what I told you about the invisible man?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. "What I mean is," he said, "The man who killed Cui Cheng, how did he become invisible?"

The Little Old Man did not answer.

Lu Xiaofeng did not press either.

Lu Xiaofeng knew that people like the Little Old Man, if he was willing to tell the answer, he would not give it any consideration and would just answer it. If he was not willing to answer, no matter how you ask, he would not give you the answer.

Therefore, he stayed with the Little Old Man, drinking and chatting.

The boat slowly departed, Lu Xiaofeng stood on the aft, watching his clothes and sleeves fluttering in the sea breeze.

[1] Penglai, one of the three fabled islands in Eastern sea, abode of immortals, fairyland.

Chapter 17 – Gong Jiu's Conspiracy

It was a sunny and clear day.

At first Lu Xiaofeng thought that the weather would turn unusually nasty. At the bottom of his heart he really hoped that the weather would turn nasty.

Because he was hoping that the Little Old Man's premonition of 'sinister outlook' was pointing to the weather. The Little Old Man was well-versed in astronomy and geography; therefore, he thought the Little Old Man was pointing to the danger of the weather.

But the sky was as blue as the glassy sea.

If the Little Old Man was not pointing to the nasty weather, then he must be pointing to a sinister conspiracy waiting for Lu Xiaofeng on the main land.

It was enough to make Lu Xiaofeng anxious. Human's heart has always been more difficult to deal with than the weather; especially if the heart you are going to deal with was a sinister heart.

The Little Old Man couldn't possibly plot against him.

The one who wanted to beat Lu Xiaofeng was, undoubtedly, only one.

-- Gong Jiu.

The mysterious Gong Jiu.

When Lu Xiaofeng pondered over this big heist, he suspected that it was Gong Jiu who murdered Cui Cheng; but he could not figure out how Gong Jiu could go pass five iron gates and entered the secret chamber to kill Cui Cheng, Xiao Hongzhu and Cheng Zhong.

He did not bring it up in front of Ying Yan Laoqi, because he did not wish to beat the grass to scare the snake.

He simply must find out who Cui Cheng's killer was. Besides, seeing the treasure did not equal to solving the case at all.

Although the beach was very small, the sand was white, fine and soft. With the sun shining on it, the sand looked like snow.

Lu Xiaofeng expected to see someone on the beach. Someone waiting for him.

-- Sha Man.

Sha Man ought to wait for him on the beach, but why didn't he see her shadow?

Although when he separated with Sha Man they did not have any agreement that she would be waiting for him here, Lu Xiaofeng really thought that Sha Man would wait for him here. And then together they

would sit down on the beach, talking to each other's ears, watching the fiery sun setting down below the water line, watching the clouds filling the sky, red with the reflection of the sun over the horizon. And then they would walk hand-in-hand to see Xiao Yu and Honest Monk together.

However, other than the waves gently lapping the shore, other than slight sea breeze brushing his skin, he did not see any trace of other human beings on the shore.

He did not even see a single pair of footprints.

-- Did Sha Man and the others meet some mishaps?

Lu Xiaofeng quickened his steps.

Beyond the beach, there was a giant dark brown boulder. This place was an exceptionally beautiful coastline. Yet Lu Xiaofeng was in no mood to enjoy it.

Walking past the long stretch of rocky beach, he reached an overhanging cliff. With a leap Lu Xiaofeng flew to the top of the cliff.

There was no trace of Sha Man at the top of the cliff.

-- Could it be that Sha Man is not anxious to see me?

-- Why wasn't she waiting for my return here?

Lu Xiaofeng saw the wooden house where Honest Monk and the others were staying. But he did not dare to walk forward.

-- What if the house is already empty? What if ...

Lu Xiaofeng halted his steps in front of the house, doubt arose in his heart.

The wooden door was closed, there was not the least bit of sound inside the house. With heavy steps Lu Xiaofeng forced his feet to move forward. Lu Xiaofeng's hand stopped short of pushing the door open.

Finally he pushed the door open.

Lu Xiaofeng saw three people sitting inside.

Honest Monk, Sha Man, Xiao Yu.

The three of them also looked at Lu Xiaofeng, yet there was not the slightest bit of happiness on their faces.

-- Although they only parted for a few days, not even Sha Man was happy to see him back?

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng's heart was beating faster. 'Thump! Thump!'

-- What had happened?

Lu Xiaofeng's questioning gaze swept their faces, finally his gaze stopped at Sha Man's face.

Sha Man laughed. A wry laugh.

Lu Xiaofeng could not bear it anymore. "What happened to you?" he asked in loud voice, "Even if you don't welcome me, you shouldn't look at me with that kind of expression."

Honest Monk stared at Lu Xiaofeng. "What do you want us to do?" he asked.

"At least you should have smiled at me," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "You should have greeted me with some pleasant words."

Honest Monk bared his teeth, giving Lu Xiaofeng a perfunctory smile, and then he laughed a bitter laugh and said, "How are you? Was the sea stormy?"

Lu Xiaofeng stared at Honest Monk. "Is that all?" he asked.

"That's all," Honest Monk replied.

Lu Xiaofeng raised his voice, "Don't you all have anything else you want to say to me?"

Honest Monk, Sha Man, Xiao Yu, three people fixed their gaze at Lu

Xiaofeng. "We do," they said, almost in unison.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at Sha Man. "You first," he said.

Sha Man said, "Do you know why I didn't wait for you at the beach, nor did I wait for you at the cliff?"

"I was going to ask," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Sha Man said, "Because you are in trouble."

"I am in trouble?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Trouble is my business, it has nothing to do with whether you came to meet me or not."

"But it does," Sha Man said.

"Tell me," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Sha Man said, "First, you are in trouble, I am not in the mood."

"And the second?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Sha Man said, "Just before you came, we were just discussing your trouble."

"Sounds to me, my trouble is very big?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Very big," Xiao Yu replied, "It's as big as something."

"As big as what?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"With your head," Xiao Yu replied.

"But my head is not that big," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Xiao Yu said, "By the time you find out about your trouble, I guarantee your head will swell three times its current size."

Lu Xiaofeng has started to feel that his head was swelling up.

Just then, Honest Monk suddenly popped up a question, "This time you came back to the island, you didn't get any result, did you?"

Lu Xiaofeng looked at him with a strange expression on his eyes, "How did you know?" he asked.

Honest Monk said, "When you were on the island, something happened on the main land."

"What is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk said, "From those missing treasures, several most expensive pieces have been traded."

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Not only that," Honest Monk continued, "Some people found Chen Ping, Li Dazhong, Sun Wutong ..."

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" Lu Xiaofeng said, "Who are Chen Ping, Li Dazhong, Sun Wutong?"

"They were not anybody special," Honest Monk replied, "Except that they happen to participate in the escorting of these missing treasures this time."

"Are you saying that they have been found?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"It's not that," Honest Monk replied.

"It's not?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk said, "It's not that they have been found, but they bodies have."

"Bodies?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I can't say it's their bodies either," Honest Monk said, "Because when they were found, they could still say something."

"Something?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "What is it?"

"Something that will bring you endless trouble," Honest Monk replied.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at Honest Monk, waiting for him to continue. But Honest Monk suddenly did not want to continue. Lu Xiaofeng looked at Xiao Yu.

Xiao Yu said, "Just before his death, Chen Ping said that the treasures were stolen by Lu Xiaofeng."

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbstruck.

Sha Man said, "Li Dazhong also said the same thing."

"And so did Sun Wutong," Honest Monk added.

Xiao Yu said, "It is called 'multitude of mouths will melt gold' [i.e. if you throw enough mud, some of it will stick.]"

"Except my mouth," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Too bad they would never listen to your explanation," Sha Man said.

"They?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Who's 'they'?"

"Troops," Sha Man replied, "The martial art experts sent by Prince

Taiping's Heir Apparent."

"To catch me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Catch you and bring you to trial," Sha Man said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "When those three, Chen Ping, Li Dazhong and Sun Wutong were found, were they together?"

"Not only they were not together, they were several hundred li apart from each other," Sha Man said.

"It's awful," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"What's awful?" Sha Man asked.

"Gong Jiu's scheme," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Are you sure this is Gong Jiu's scheme?" Sha Man asked.

"That's right," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Because I have seen Chen Ping, Li Dazhong and those bunch of people on the island."

Honest Monk suddenly stared at Lu Xiaofeng's four eyebrows.

"What's on my four eyebrows?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I am afraid you have to shave two," Honest Monk said.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because," Honest Monk said, "Everybody knows Lu Xiaofeng has four eyebrows. Everybody knows Lu Xiaofeng stole the treasure; hence everybody wants to arrest Lu Xiaofeng. If you still have four eyebrows, won't the target become very obvious?"

Lu Xiaofeng stroked the two eyebrows above his lips. He said, "Shave it, huh? Won't it be a pity?"

"I was not talking about those two," Honest Monk said.

Lu Xiaofeng was stunned. "You want to shave my real eyebrows?" he asked.

"That way I guarantee no one would recognize you," Honest Monk said.

"Why don't you just kill me?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Why would I want to kill you?" Honest Monk asked.

"Because you wanted to shave my eyebrows," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"It was just an idea," Honest Monk said.

"I think it would be best if you never mention it," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Then I won't," Honest Monk said.

Lu Xiaofeng held out his hand; he wanted to shake Honest Monk's hand, while saying, "Friends!"

But Honest Monk pulled back his hand, "Good friends or old friends, you can't shake my hand."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk replied, "Because Monk's hands are vegetarian-fed flesh, while your hands are meat-fed flesh."

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbstruck.

"Pfft!" Xiao Yu and Sha Man stifled their laughter.

Lu Xiaofeng was going to pull his outstretched hand, but Honest Monk reached out and grabbed his hand.

"Why do you want to shake my hand now?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I suddenly realize a truth," Honest Monk replied, "When I was kid, I also ate meat, so my hands are also meat-fed flesh."

Lu Xiaofeng's expression made Xiao Yu and Sha Man roared in laughter.

Lu Xiaofeng shook Honest Monk's hand and said, "Tell me, what should we do now?"

Honest Monk said, "There are things that we can see clearly, but are unable to understand. There are things that we can't see, yet we can figure out the whys and wherefores [orig. 'mountain has a connecting pulse throughout like a dragon', an idiom from fengshui] of it. Therefore, I advise you to see someone."

"Who?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Your good friend," Honest Monk replied.

"My good friend?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Concerning this heist, we are like blind men although we can see," Honest Monk said, "Therefore, I think a real blind man would be able to see it more clearly than we do."

"Hua Manlou?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Hua Manlou!" Honest Monk said.

A building filled with fresh flowers[1].

When Lu Xiaofeng smelled the fragrance of the fresh flowers, immediately his heart was filled with warmth, just like the warmth of his friendship with Hua Manlou.

-- Is there any warmth on earth warmer than friendship?

Lu Xiaofeng remembered Sha Man.

-- Love? The feeling of love, it ought to be sweet. Warmth, it is absolutely the feeling of friendship.

Lu Xiaofeng was quite satisfied with his conclusion, so when he treaded on the stairs, his steps felt unusually light.

He was guessing that since his steps today were unusually light, Hua Manlou's sense of hearing ought not to detect his presence.

Therefore, with a cheerful voice he loudly greeted, "No need to guess, it's me, Lu Xiaofeng!"

No response, no Hua Manlou's frank and cheerful laughter either.

Lu Xiaofeng pushed the door open. The fresh flowers were still there, the fixtures and furnishing of the room was still as before.

Only one detail was different. The chair in front of the window did not have someone in it. Someone who loved life.

Twilight like this, beautiful weather like this, Hua Manlou ought to sit on the chair in front of the window; quietly listening to the sound of sunset, quietly enjoying the beauty of life. Why wasn't he here?

Myriads of questions floating around Lu Xiaofeng's mind. Where did Hua Manlou go? He sat on the chair in front of the window.

Sound of footsteps, coming suddenly from the stairs. Lu Xiaofeng did not move at all, even his breathing suddenly became very light.

-- Was it Hua Manlou?

He did not know, because he had never heard Hua Manlou's footsteps when he was treading the stairs. Not that Hua Manlou never went upstairs or downstairs, but they were always going up and down the stairs together, chatting and joking; hence he basically has never paid any attention to the sound of Hua Manlou's footsteps.

The footsteps were already in front of the door. The door opened.
"Who's there?"

It was Hua Manlou's voice.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. Hua Manlou was indeed Hua Manlou. Lu Xiaofeng was sitting motionless, yet he was able to sense someone in the room.

Lu Xiaofeng had no choice but to say, "I have no choice but admiring

you."

"You don't need to admire me."

"Why?"

"Because this is my way of survival."

Lu Xiaofeng looked at his good friend, his face showed even more admiration.

"I just find it very strange," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"What's so strange?" Hua Manlou asked.

"This time of the day, yet you have just come in from the outside?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I can't come in from the outside?" Hua Manlou said.

"Aren't you always sitting on the chair at this time, enjoying a quiet evening?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"There's time when a man can change," Hua Manlou said.

"You mean, you already changed your habit?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"That's right," Hua Manlou replied.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"What about you?" Hua Manlou asked in return, "Why did you change your habit?"

"Me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked in surprise, "I have not changed."

"You have not changed?" Hua Manlou asked.

"Why would I change?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"You stole thirty-five million taels worth of gold, pearl and jewels," Hua Manlou said.

"You also heard?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"That's right," Hua Manlou replied.

"Who told you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Wu Biao," Hua Manlou replied.

"Who's Wu Biao?" Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"You don't know?" Hua Manlou asked.

"How should I know?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Because Wu Biao was one of the escorts," Hua Manlou replied.

"Did he personally tell you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"That's right," Hua Manlou replied.

"And you believe him?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Hua Manlou said, "When a man is at the death's door, would he tell a lie?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not answer.

"Why don't you say something?" Hua Manlou said.

"What can I say?" Lu Xiaofeng said, "You'd rather believe a dead man, you don't believe your own friend. What do you want me to say?"

"Did I say that I don't believe you?" Hua Manlou said.

Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Didn't you say ..."

Hua Manlou said, "I only said: 'When a man is at the death's door, would he tell a lie?' That's all."

"Aren't you saying that ..." Lu Xiaofeng started again.

"That was a question," Hua Manlou cut it off again.

Lu Xiaofeng felt strange, "You ask me to answer?" he asked.

"Yes," Hua Manlou said.

"Because you are not sure whether before he died Wu Biao told you the truth or a lie?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Yes," Hua Manlou replied, "That's the reason I went out to take a walk; that's the reason I did not sit here enjoying the delight of the dusk; that's the reason I just came in from the outside at the best time of the day; that's the reason you are able to sit on my chair, enjoying the beauty of the sunset."

"You are wrong," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Oh?" Hua Manlou said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I sit on your chair, not enjoying the beauty of the sunset at all."

"Why?" Hua Manlou asked.

"Because I was worried about you," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

With a cheerful laugh Hua Manlou said, "Therefore, we are indeed a pair of close friends."

"What you said is extremely true," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Hua Manlou said, "You came to me, it must be for this case?"

"That's right," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Did you find any result from your walking around?"

"I only found one thing," Hua Manlou replied.

"What is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"The subordinates of Prince Taiping's Heir Apparent are looking everywhere to arrest and bring you to trial," Hua Manlou said.

With a wry laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "This is a conspiracy."

"Whose conspiracy?" Hua Manlou asked.

"Gong Jiu's conspiracy," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Who's Gong Jiu?" Hua Manlou asked.

"Gong Jiu is a very formidable person," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

By the time Lu Xiaofeng finished narrating his strange tale of going out to sea, the sky has turned dark.

Hua Manlou sat on his chair, deep in thought.

Lu Xiaofeng lighted the oil lamp, the light shone on Hua Manlou's deep concentration face. Lu Xiaofeng stood quietly, fixing his gaze on Hua Manlou.

After a long time, Hua Manlou exhaled slowly. He said, "According to your information, it is very clear that the Little Old Man and Gong Jiu are the masterminds of this case. However, this is not important, what's really important is you must find out who murdered Cui Cheng."

"That's right," Lu Xiaofeng said, "It's the invisible man."

Hua Manlou said, "Didn't the Little Old Man tell you of several ways to make a person invisible?"

"Quite a few," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Hua Manlou said, "Did he mention that suicide is also a way to be invisible?"

Lu Xiaofeng sprang on his feet.

-- True, why can't Cui Cheng commit suicide?

Yet, Lu Xiaofeng still had to ask, "Why would Cui Cheng commit suicide?"

Hua Manlou said, "If he killed himself, his family would live a very good life."

"However," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Did you know Ye Xingshi's autopsy report?"

According to Ye Xingshi's observation:

-- They had been dead for at least an hour, they were killed by a very thin and fast blade; one stab and their lives were gone.

-- Because the blade was extremely thin, the movement was extremely fast, it did not even leave any wound.

-- The fatal stab undoubtedly went into the lower end of the lung. The blade penetrated in, immediately the blood burst into the thoracic cavity; therefore, no blood flowed outside.

Hua Manlou suddenly remembered something. "No," he said, "Cui Cheng did not commit suicide."

"I thought so too," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Because he had no ability to do so."

Hua Manlou said, "The one committing suicide was either Xiao Hongzhu or Cheng Zhong; or else both of them committed suicide."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Are you saying that they had been bought or perhaps threatened? And thus after killing Cui Cheng, they committed suicide?"

Hua Manlou said, "Don't you think my reasoning makes sense?"

"So now I just need to find one person," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Who?" Hua Manlou asked.

"Ye Xingshi," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"What do you want from him?" Hua Manlou asked.

"I want to ask him," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Was the wound on Cui Cheng and the others, three people, really as he described it?"

"Why do you doubt?" Hua Manlou asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "In case the wound on those three people was really as he said, *i.e.* was caused by fast blade, then among them, no one committed suicide."

"Why?" Hua Manlou asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "None of them had the ability to employ such a fast blade, especially when they were about to commit suicide."

It was supposed to be full moon, but there was no full moon in the sky. There was only black cloud; the black cloud that drift along the strong wind. The wind was indeed very strong.

Standing outside the door of Ye Xingshi's residence, the sleeves of Lu Xiaofeng's clothes were rustling in the wind.

Ye Xingshi's family servant opened the door, and said in a loud voice, "It's late, Master does not see patients anymore."

"Even if it is an emergency?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Is it you who wants to see Master?" the servant asked.

"Yes," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"You don't look like someone who is sick," the servant said, "Unless ..."

"Unless what?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Unless you have mental disorder," the servant said. As soon as he finished speaking, 'Bang!' the door was slammed.

Lu Xiaofeng pushed with both hands and the door opened again.

The servant glowered at him ferociously and angrily said, "What are you doing?"

"I just want to tell you something," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"What is it?" the servant asked.

"If I can't see your Master tonight, there will be someone who will have mental disorder," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Who?" the servant asked.

"Me," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"You are making fun of me!" the servant angrily said.

"Not at all," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I am telling you the truth. Because 'thirty-five millions taels worth of gold, pearls and jewels' very soon will drive me crazy."

The servant stared at him blankly.

"Now can I see your master?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The servant suddenly stared at Lu Xiaofeng's face; there was fear on his face. "You ... you are Lu Xiaofeng!"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded.

The servant did not say anything. Suddenly he raised his hand to slap Lu Xiaofeng. Lu Xiaofeng only struck him lightly, the servant was knocked down to the ground.

The lantern looked like a sacrificial vessel. It was sitting on a table in the middle of the main hall. Behind the table a man was sitting on a chair. On the table lay some papers, pen and ink.

Lu Xiaofeng walked toward the middle of the hall. "Ye Xingshi?" he said.

The man nodded. Raising his right hand, he motioned Lu Xiaofeng to sit down. So Lu Xiaofeng sat down.

The man picked up a pen, dipped it in the ink, and wrote down on a piece of paper, "Is there something you want to see me about? "

Lu Xiaofeng was stunned.

-- Since when did Ye Xingshi become a mute?

Lu Xiaofeng stared at Ye Xingshi.

Ye Xingshi laughed and pointed to his own ears.

"You can hear?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Ye Xingshi nodded.

Lu Xiaofeng was about to ask him a question, suddenly he felt that Ye Xingshi's gaze looked very familiar.

He remembered the saying, "Just find Ge Tong, all roads will be clear."
[See Chapter 7.]

He recalled something that happened on the island:

-- Someone from inside the Buddha statue pounced on him, an ice-cold hand clutched his throat.

-- The ice-cold hand suddenly lost its strength, hence he was able to calm himself, and looked at the man clutching his throat.

And the man he saw was precisely Ge Tong. He would never forget Ge Tong's gaze as he looked at Lu Xiaofeng. The gaze that was precisely like this.

Right now Ye Xingshi's gaze was exactly the same as Ge Tong's. Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng said, "You are not Ye Xingshi."

Ye Xingshi was shocked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "You are Ge Tong!"

Ge Tong suddenly sprang up and attacked Lu Xiaofeng. Not only he was the third-generation Eagle Claw's adopted son, he was also the Wang Family's ideal son-in-law. His nickname was 'Titan Hawk', naturally the power of Eagle Claw martial art of his hand was not weak.

However, Lu Xiaofeng was already prepared. He waited until Ge Tong's Eagle Claw swept pass, and then lightning fast the edge of his palm chopped on Ge Tong's wrist. 'Crack!' Ge Tong's right wrist was broken by Lu Xiaofeng's chop.

Ge Tong collapsed, his wrist broken. But why did Ge Tong collapse?

Lu Xiaofeng was shocked. He lifted up Ge Tong's neck, and to his surprise he saw three white, shiny needles on a neat row on the back of Ge Tong's neck.

Lu Xiaofeng lunged forward in one big jump toward a shadow that had just disappeared behind a wall. Unleashing his qinggong, Lu Xiaofeng ran after the shadow.

A temple. A broken down mountain temple. The shadow reached the open space in front of the temple, and suddenly it stopped.

Lu Xiaofeng also stopped. He stood motionless in full alert.

The shadow turned around. Suddenly the black cloud opened a slit, revealing a weak light of the full moon.

Lu Xiaofeng jumped in fright. Because he saw that the shadow's appearance was completely identical to the one Ge Tong was trying to masquerade.

-- Was the shadow the real Ye Xingshi? Before Lu Xiaofeng could ask any question, the shadow suddenly laughed aloud.

Finished laughing, the shadow said, "Lu Xiaofeng's martial art skill is indeed a fully justified reputation!"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Compared to your skill in releasing secret projectiles, I am afraid it is still far too inferior."

The shadow laughed and said, "And don't forget, there is still my skill in changing appearance."

"Did you change Ge Tong's appearance?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"That's right," the shadow replied.

"I did not expect the disciple of Shaolin's Tie Jian Dashi [see Chapter 1] is also adept at changing appearance," Lu Xiaofeng said.

With a gloomy voice the shadow said, "My Shifu only taught me martial arts, you must not dishonor my Shifu's good reputation."

"So you are the real Ye Xingshi?"

"Replacement guaranteed if not genuine!" the shadow replied. [oh, I know that a simple 'authentic' will do, but I am always fascinated by these idioms.]

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Ye Xingshi has enjoyed flourishing reputation in Jianghu for a long time as one of the four famous doctors; not only his medical expertise exquisite, he has a profound mastery of the martial arts handed down personally by Tie Jian Dashi. In all his life he treads the path of chivalry ['xia'] and practices medicine in help of the people of the world. How could he kill people for no reason?"

"Whom did I kill?" the shadow asked.

"Ge Tong!" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"How do you know that it was me who killed Ge Tong?" the shadow said, "Did you see me killed Ge Tong with your own eyes?"

Lu Xiaofeng said, "'Silver needle piercing the acupoints, entering the seventy percent of the brain', that is the internal strength of Shaolin's unique internal energy technique."

"Good eyesight!" the shadow said, "Excellent judgment."

"So you admit that you killed Ge Tong?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"What if I do? And what if I don't?" the shadow said.

"If you admit," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Then I'll say that although Ye Xingshi has changed, he is still a real man."

Ye Xingshi said, "I did not expect Lu Xiaofeng's mouth to be this formidable."

"I am simply telling the truth," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Ye Xingshi only coldly snorted twice, but did not answer.

"You seemed to know that I was coming to look for you," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I know that you would definitely come to look for me," Ye Xingshi said.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because the one who knows the real reason of their deaths, other than me, there is no second person," Ye Xingshi said.

"Were they really killed by a fast blade?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Yes," Ye Xingshi replied.

"Is it true that they have been dead for at least an hour?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Ye Xingshi did not respond. There was a painful look on his face.

"How long have they been dead actually?" Lu Xiaofeng pressed on, "When you came in, did they just die?"

Ye Xingshi opened his mouth, he seemed to be reluctant to talk, yet he wanted to talk. "They ..."

Lu Xiaofeng knew it was a critical juncture in Ye Xingshi's mind; if he talked, it means he was abandoning the people controlling him from behind, if he did not talk, that means he resigned the rest of his life to become a puppet.

Ye Xingshi suddenly made up his mind. He shouted, "They died ..." before he could finish, he tumbled down.

When Ye Xingshi was talking, Lu Xiaofeng's eyes were already looking to four sides, his ears were listening to eight directions, closely watching for any activity around them. But he did not see anything, and yet Ye Xingshi has fallen.

Lu Xiaofeng was about to stoop down to look at the cause of Ye Xingshi's death when his eyes suddenly caught lantern light inside the broken-down mountain temple.

At first the light was very weak, and then, the entire temple was brightly lit.

Lu Xiaofeng knew that he did not need to examine Ye Xingshi anymore. The secret he wanted to find out was inside the temple. Therefore, he walked toward the mountain temple.

The temple's gate was half-closed. The light was shining from inside through the door gap.

Lu Xiaofeng stood at the door. He was contemplating whether he should push the door open and come in, or he should slip through the door gap. Which move would carry greater risk? Lu Xiaofeng did not know.

Actually, Lu Xiaofeng did not need to know. He had already gone through fire and water countless times, so what if he goes through it one more time?

So Lu Xiaofeng simply reached out and pushed the door.

But the door did not open, because as soon as his hand touched the wood, an image of smiling Sha Man suddenly appeared in his mind.

A man in love could have apprehension.

Lu Xiaofeng was not afraid to die, but that was before. Previously, when he confronted death, he did not have love in his heart. Now he did, he remembered Sha Man, he thought about how Sha Man must be worried over him, he thought about how Sha Man would have to wander alone and miserable in Jianghu.

Not only Lu Xiaofeng did not continue pushing the door, he pulled his hand instead.

The temple was very quiet.

The people inside the temple must be very formidable. People who can wait patiently won't be too-ordinary people.

Lu Xiaofeng was in a totally defensive mode. He stood outside the door. Even when a strong wind blew the sleeves of his clothing, he did not move.

He seemed to have figured out that the best way was to have a patience match; whoever loses patience will reveal weak points. If he could not endure it, there were only two paths he could take: risking his life by charging in, or leave without finding out the secret behind Ye Xingshi's murder.

If the people inside could not endure, they would either talk, or burst out to find out the outcome. Either way, it would be beneficial to Lu Xiaofeng.

If they talked, Lu Xiaofeng would be able to determine the direction of their hiding place, he could even find out who the speaker was.

If they burst out, it would be even more advantageous to Lu Xiaofeng, because then Lu Xiaofeng would not have any apprehension whatsoever.

Unless the person's martial art skill was a lot higher than Lu Xiaofeng's. But Lu Xiaofeng was never worried about this point.

Lu Xiaofeng knew that there was more than one person inside the temple. Because he heard whispers; too bad the wind was simply too strong outside that he was unable to hear what the people inside were saying, he could not hear whether the speaker was a male or a female, young or old.

He could only be certain of one thing: the people inside were already a bit impatient.

To this fact, Lu Xiaofeng did not feel proud at all. He always thought that he was the most patient man. Otherwise, Lu Xiaofeng would have turned into a pile of bones early on, a pile of dried up bones buried in the ground. Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng was still standing motionless.

The people inside really could not endure anymore. A sweet and tender voice of a woman said, "Aren't you feeling the cold wind outside? It's not only cold, it's also strong and bone-chilling."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

-- Beef Soup.

Hearing Beef Soup's voice, how could he not laugh?

Lu Xiaofeng said with a laugh, "Cold, strong and bone-chilling wind is always more enjoyable than sabers that pose danger on every side."

A male voice said, "How do you know I am going to use saber and not sword?"

Lu Xiaofeng's smile froze on his face.

-- Gong Jiu.

Hearing Gong Jiu's voice, how could Lu Xiaofeng's smile not freeze?

Lu Xiaofeng did not speak, he simply reached out and very gently pushed the half-closed door until it was fully opened.

Before Lu Xiaofeng entered, the strong wind outside has already blowing in, blowing the solitary lantern inside that the flame was flickering erratically.

Under the flickering light, Gong Jiu and Beef Soup's faces were also flashing between light and darkness, just like their personality, sometimes gloomy sometimes sunny erratically.

Seeing old friends, Lu Xiaofeng has always laughed. Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng smiled at Gong Jiu and Beef Soup and said, "Pardon me for keeping the two of you waiting."

It was supposed to be a humor, and Gong Jiu really feel like laughing, but he wasn't laughing.

Yet Beef Soup was laughing cheerfully. "So cold outside," she said, "Why didn't you come in earlier to have a bowl of beef soup?"

"I was afraid if I came in earlier, I would not have had beef soup," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"So what did you think you would have?" Beef Soup asked.

"Yan Wang [King of Hell] Soup," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Beef Soup laughed, "We are old friends," she said, "How could we serve you Yan Wang Soup?"

"Perhaps you wouldn't," Lu Xiaofeng said, "But your Jiu Ge might."

With a sinister voice Gong Jiu said, "You are wrong."

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Gong Jiu said, "If I wanted to kill you, I could have killed you at Ye

Xingshi's house."

"So you knew that I was going to look for Ye Xingshi?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I did not dare to be presumptuous at all," Gong Jiu said, "I merely guessed that you may, therefore, I have been staying at Ye Xingshi's house."

"What for?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"To wait for you," Gong Jiu replied.

"I am here," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Why don't you kill me?"

"Right now I do not want to kill you," Gong Jiu said.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because you are alone," Gong Jiu replied.

"You want to kill Sha Man too?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"And Xiao Yu, and Honest Monk," Gong Jiu replied.

"Do you have to kill all four of us?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Gong Jiu nodded.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Gong Jiu coldly said, "Because I hate all of you."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "You may hate me, you may hate Sha Man, you may hate Xiao Yu, but why do hate Honest Monk?"

Gong Jiu replied, "Without him, you would have been dead on the island long ago."

"What if you can't find them for the rest of your life?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I will definitely find them," said Gong Jiu.

"You are so confident?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Gong Jiu coldly snorted.

"Can you tell me the reason of your confidence?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"If I can't find them for the rest of my life, then you cannot hope to see them for the rest of your life either," Gong Jiu said.

Lu Xiaofeng was stunned. "Why?" he asked.

"Because," Gong Jiu said, "From now on I will follow you. Unless you won't see them anymore. Otherwise, I will also see them."

Lu Xiaofeng's heart turned cold. "Was that the reason you stayed at Ye Xingshi's house to wait for me?"

"No," Gong Jiu said.

"No?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Gong Jiu said, "I originally thought that all four of you would come to Ye Xingshi's house together, then I could catch everything in one net. I didn't expect you to come alone; hence I had to lure you here."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "You lured me here just so can tell me that you are going to follow me?"

"That's right," Gong Jiu said.

"If you just follow me secretly, won't you also find them?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

With a cold laugh Gong Jiu said, "I simply want you to know."

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Have you seen a cat catching a mouse?" Gong Jiu asked, "Will the cat immediately eat the mouse?"

There was a cold stream flowing in the depth of Lu Xiaofeng's heart; he did not answer.

Gong Jiu continued, "I simply want to let you know that I am following you, I want you to be anxious, I want you to want to see Sha Man, yet you do not dare to meet her. I want to see you wasting away, to see you suffer from the torture of your own yearning." Gong Jiu laughed maniacally.

Lu Xiaofeng calmly said, "If I am dead, won't you also can't find them?"

Gong Jiu said, "Are you saying that before you die, you don't want to see Sha Man even once?"

Lu Xiaofeng remained silent. A dark shadow suddenly crept into his heart; it was not clear whether it was a shadow of death, or because she could not find him, Sha Man was concerned and thus was wasting away with each passing day. Lu Xiaofeng started to feel afraid.

Gong Jiu could see the panic on Lu Xiaofeng's eyes; his grim and cold laughter suddenly turned into a cheerful and proud laughter.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at Gong Jiu, and then he turned his attention to Beef Soup. Suddenly he said, "Don't you have some beef soup to entertain me with?"

Beef Soup was taken aback. She stared at Lu Xiaofeng and asked, "You want to drink beef soup?"

"That's right," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"You are still in the mood to drink beef soup?" Beef Soup asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Life is hard and we are destined to die; don't you think being a full ghost is much more comfortable than a hungry ghost? Besides ..."

"Besides what?" Beef Soup asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Besides, if I didn't drink a bowl of beef soup, how could I find the strength to play this game of hide-and-seek?"

Beef Soup stared at Lu Xiaofeng for a moment. Without saying anything, she turned around and went inside.

By the time Beef Soup reappeared, there was a bowl of piping hot beef soup in her hands.

Lu Xiaofeng was not being polite at all. 'Glug! Glug! Glug!' he drank the beef soup and turned the bowl upside down. Wiping his mouth, he said, "I have a question."

"What question?" Beef Soup asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "No matter where you go, do you always bring real beef soup with you?"

"Not necessarily," Beef Soup replied.

"Then why is it that every time I meet you, you always have beef soup ready to drink?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because I prepared it for you," Beef Soup replied.

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Didn't you say that being a full ghost is much more comfortable than a hungry ghost?" Beef Soup said.

"That's right," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"That's exactly the reason why I always prepare beef soup for you," Beef Soup said.

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "In that case, I should be really grateful to you."

"I don't need your gratitude," Beef Soup said, "I just hope that after you become a full ghost, it would be nice if you don't come to entangle me."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Now that I have had my beef soup, would the two of you allow me to withdraw?"

"You may leave at any time," Gong Jiu said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "This time, how much time will you give me to have a head start?"

Gong Jiu said, "Until I feel that I won't be able to catch up with you."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "You have never fought a battle that you have no confidence in winning, haven't you?"

"If I don't have any confidence, why fight?" Gong Jiu said.

"In that case, I'll leave now. So long," Lu Xiaofeng said.

As soon as he finished speaking, Lu Xiaofeng unleashed his qinggong and flew away.

[1] The name 'Hua Man Lou' literally means 'flowers filling the building'. 'Lou' refers to multi-story building.

Chapter 18 – Cat catching mouse

If a cat and a mouse were having a race, which one would run faster?

When Lu Xiaofeng was running, he suddenly thought about this question.

The cat should be able to run faster, right? Lu Xiaofeng thought. But the mouse is able to get into a hole, and it can also hide inside a gutter, which definitely some things that the cat cannot do.

Lu Xiaofeng was not a mouse, but he did not think that he was a mouse either.

Although Gong Jiu thought so, Lu Xiaofeng did not agree.

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng did not enter a hole, nor he hid in some shameful places.

Lu Xiaofeng believed in his own qinggong, even if it was not number one under the heavens, he was convinced that it was at least superior to Gong Jiu's.

Therefore, he did not make any other effort except running along a major road.

Running on major road, although it was highly conspicuous, it was much better than being sneaky; besides, at the speed he was running,

who would notice that he was Lu Xiaofeng?

Dusk.

The lanterns in this small town starting to brighten the hazy sunset glow. Even if Lu Xiaofeng's endurance was better, after running for a day and a night without either eating or drinking anything, he simply had to stop.

Besides, by running in complete disregard of his own life like this, Lu Xiaofeng thought that forget Gong Jiu, even a hungry lion would not be able to outrun him.

Lu Xiaofeng believed that this small town was a totally safe place to stop and have a meal.

He slowed down, and entered the small town.

Noodle shop. A nondescript noodle shop. Although he was convinced that this was a safe place, Lu Xiaofeng still selected a small noodle shop at the corner of the street to stop and eat.

He did not wish to attract anybody's attention, he only wished to eat a bowl of hot noodle, and then found any good place he could sleep, restoring the strength of his feet, breaking away from Gong Jiu's pursue, so he could see Sha Man bit earlier.

The noodle shop's proprietor was an old man. His hair was grey, his clothes were greasy, his face was wrinkly; his overall appearance was that

of a man who had succumbed to fate.

The proprietor greeted Lu Xiaofeng amiably. "Mister Guest," he said, "What would you like to eat?"

"A big bowl of beef noodle soup," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

The proprietor laughed, "Coming right up," he said, "Would you also like some pickled vegetable or a pot of warm wine?"

"No need," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Just add two salted egg on the noodle, it should be enough."

A bowl of steaming and savory noodle was brought out. Lu Xiaofeng could smell the delicious smell of the beef; his tummy immediately growled.

In no time at all he finished the noodle completely. He picked up the bowl to finish the soup as well. But as he held the bowl in his hands, a four-horse carriage sped over from the direction of the town gate.

Lu Xiaofeng held the bowl in front of his face while looking at this luxurious carriage.

When the carriage reached the noodle shop, the driver pulled the reins, the carriage came to an abrupt stop.

From inside the carriage came a sweet voice, "Why are you drinking

beef soup prepared by someone else?"

Again, it was Beef Soup's voice.

Beef Soup in the carriage, naturally Gong Jiu was also in it.

Lu Xiaofeng lost his appetite to drink the soup.

With face full of smiles, Beef Soup walked in with a bowl of beef soup in her hands, which she gracefully placed in front of Lu Xiaofeng.

"Don't you like my beef soup?" Beef Soup asked.

Lu Xiaofeng did not answer. Picking the bowl of Beef Soup's beef soup, 'Glug! Glug! Glug!' he drank the soup dry.

Gong Jiu already sat down at the table right next to Lu Xiaofeng's. Facing the proprietor, he said, "A pot of warm Nu'erhong [blushing young maiden]."

The noodle shop's proprietor did not seem to be surprised with this sudden change of events, as if it was a common occurrence that he was already quite used to. Before long, he put the wine in front of Gong Jiu.

Gong Jiu poured two cups, with his left hand he picked one cup and handed it over to Lu Xiaofeng.

"Come," Gong Jiu said, "Bottoms up!"

Lu Xiaofeng received the cup; he looked at Gong Jiu and asked, "Why must I bottoms up?"

"The cat catches the mouse, it must tease the mouse a little," Gong Jiu said, "Now the kitten tells the mouse to drink, can the mouse be disobedient?"

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng downed the wine.

Gong Jiu sipped his wine slowly. When he finished, he said, "Good wine!"

"Is it better than my beef soup?" Beef Soup asked.

"Those two cannot be compared to each other," Gong Jiu said.

"Why?" Beef Soup asked.

"Can the mouse be compared to the cat?" Gong Jiu asked.

Beef Soup said, "Are you saying that cat must drink wine, mouse must drink soup; therefore, they cannot be compared?"

Gong Jiu guffawed. "Cat can ride the carriage, but mouse must walk on foot," he said, "Cat can sleep on the carriage, mouse must force himself to

hasten on with his journey. Can they be compared?"

Beef Soup's laughter was very cheerful.

Lu Xiaofeng clapped. "Good speech," he said, "The two of you can come up with such a good banter, why don't you do something?"

Gong Jiu laughed and said, "What thing?"

"Comedy routine[1]," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Gong Jiu could not laugh anymore. "I really admire you," he said.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because in time like this, you are still in the mood for jokes," Gong Jiu replied.

"Perhaps this is a way for the mouse to find amusement in his own way," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Gong Jiu coldly said, "In that case, you should go and enjoy yourself."

"Are you kicking me out?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Don't you want to get away from me?" Gong Jiu asked.

"Can I ask a question before I go?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"What question?" Gong Jiu asked.

"I really want to know, how did you pursue me to this place?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Very simple," Gong Jiu said, "Only one word."

"Only one word?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"That's right," Gong Jiu replied, "Only one word."

"What word?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Money," Gong Jiu replied.

"Money?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Money will make the devil turn millstones," Gong Jiu replied, "Much less people?"

"You bribed people to follow my track?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Wrong," Gong Jiu replied.

"Why is it wrong?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Gong Jiu said, "Even I cannot run after you, who on earth would be able to chase after you? Even if there was people like that, can such people be bribed?"

"That's why I don't understand," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Even if you spent money to bribe people, you wouldn't necessarily know my whereabouts."

Gong Jiu said, "I spend money to bribe not only one person, but a lot of people."

"A lot?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Just how many?"

"I don't know the exact number either," Gong Jiu said.

Lu Xiaofeng showed a perplexed expression.

Gong Jiu laughed and said, "Do you really want to know my secret?"

"If you don't want to reveal it, I have no way of forcing you," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Gong Jiu stood up, and walked over to the signboard of the noodle shop.

Lu Xiaofeng followed Gong Jiu with his eyes. Gong Jiu's finger pointed to the signboard and Lu Xiaofeng was surprised to see a triangle marking on the signboard.

"What marking is that?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"It means Lu Xiaofeng is here," Gong Jiu replied.

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Do you know how much money I have to spend for this pot of wine?" Gong Jiu asked.

"How much?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Gong Jiu did not reply, he took out a gold ingot from his pocket and gave it to the noodle shop's proprietor. The noodle shop's proprietor laughed that his eyes narrowed into a couple of slits.

Gong Jiu turned to Lu Xiaofeng and said, "Do you understand it now?"

"I understand half," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Let me tell you then," Gong Jiu said, "I have already spread the word, whoever see a man with four eyebrows shall make an arrow indicating the direction he is going, whoever see the man with four eyebrows staying for the night or having a meal, shall make a triangle mark. When I see these markings, I bestow rewards. Just think, where can you go?"

Gong Jiu laughed aloud, he was very proud of himself.

But Lu Xiaofeng was frowning. With his fingers he gently stroked the moustache above his lips. He recalled Honest Monk said, 'You had better shave your real eyebrows, and then nobody would recognize you.'

-- Shave his eyebrows? How ridiculous!

Lu Xiaofeng could not help laughing aloud as well.

Gong Jiu was surprised, "What are you laughing at?"

"I am laughing at myself," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "I am just too dumb."

"Why?" Gong Jiu asked.

"Since I cannot get away, why would I want to go?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"You won't leave?" Gong Jiu asked.

"I am not leaving," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Actually," Gong Jiu said, "You won't go, I don't have any objection. But ..." Gong Jiu laughed his gloomy, sinister laugh again.

"But what?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Gong Jiu pulled Beef Soup in his arms and said, "It's not a big deal for me to keep you company in here, I have wine, I have beauty, but what about you? What about Sha Man?"

Gong Jiu laughed heartily.

Lu Xiaofeng stared at Gong Jiu. Without saying anything, he turned around and walked away.

"Where are you going?" Gong Jiu asked.

"Sleep," Lu Xiaofeng said without even looking back.

Lu Xiaofeng walked several steps; suddenly he turned around and walked back to Gong Jiu with palm turned up.

With a puzzled look Gong Jiu asked, "What do you want?"

"I want gold," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Why would I want to give you gold?" Gong Jiu asked.

"Because I am going to draw a triangle marking in front of the hotel I am going to spend the night at," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Therefore, you have to keep your promise."

Gong Jiu was dumbstruck.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed a very complacent laugh; raising his voice, he said, "Give it to me!"

Gong Jiu paled.

"You want people to distrust you?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Gong Jiu took out a gold ingot and gave it to Lu Xiaofeng.

Very proud of himself, Lu Xiaofeng played with the gold ingot in his hands, he tossed it up to the air and caught it back, twice, and then he walked out.

He only took two steps, suddenly he looked back and laughed. "Early morning tomorrow," he told Gong Jiu, "I may make another triangle at the place where I have breakfast."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed heartily. His voice gradually faded away.

Lu Xiaofeng loved to drink wine, his favorite was drinking wine while lying in bed.

When he was lying in bed, usually he loved to have a big bowl of wine on his chest, and then, just like a dead man, not moving at all, when he wanted to drink the wine, he would take a deep breath, sucking the air,

along with the wine from the cup, so that it entered his mouth, and then with a 'glug' the wine finally entered his belly.

Right now he was lying in bed just like that. And then there was also a big bowl filled to the brim with wine on his chest. Only, he lay down unmoving like a dead man for a long time, yet he had not sucked the wine at all.

Because, the first time he drank wine like this, the Boss' Wife was sitting by his side. As soon as the wine cup was empty, the Boss' Wife immediately poured some more wine for him[2].

And now, since the Boss' Wife was not around, he treasured this cup of wine very much; if he finished the wine, who would pour the wine for him? He did not want to get up to pour the wine for himself; only people who do not enjoy life would do things like that.

Hence, suddenly Lu Xiaofeng missed the Boss' Wife.

The 'Boss' Wife' was a woman, a very, very beautiful woman.

Beautiful women usually marry very early. The 'Boss' Wife' was no exception.

In fact, the reason she was called 'The Boss' Wife' was because she married to 'The Boss'.

The Boss was Zhu Ting. Zhu Ting was an old friend of Lu Xiaofeng, they have known each other since they were both in diapers [orig. 'opened

pants’].

Therefore, the relationship between Lu Xiaofeng and the Boss’ Wife was a clean one.

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng missed those days of drinking wine while lying down.

He missed Zhu Ting even more.

Zhu Ting was fat. Fat people appear that they have good fortune, and only people with good fortune can be a boss. Therefore, everybody started to call Zhu Ting ‘the Boss’.

The fact was, Zhu Ting has never opened any shop, yet his days were very comfortable. Because he had a pair of exceptionally skillful hands, he was able to make all kinds of weird and wonderful things. One time, he even made a wooden man that can walk on its own.

Lu Xiaofeng cherished the memory of Zhu Ting’s pair of hands. If Zhu Ting could make a wooden Lu Xiaofeng that could walk on its own, Lu Xiaofeng’s problem would be solved.

But Zhu Ting was not around.

Sha Man was not around either.

If Sha Man were around, even if the two of them had to die together, he

felt that his life would not be in vain.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly sat up, the wine in the bowl splashed onto his body.

He knocked his own noggin forcefully, while in his heart he cursed himself, "So stupid!"

Since he was willing to die together with Sha Man, why would he be afraid of Gong Jiu chasing after him? Why not go back directly to Sha Man? Perhaps relying on his and Sha Man's martial art skills, they could defeat Gong Jiu! Who knows?

As soon as he had this thought, Lu Xiaofeng rushed toward the door.

When he opened the door he found out a pair of eyes that was originally watching over his door, and was quickly looking away.

From the eyes, Lu Xiaofeng looked at the face, and he saw an unfamiliar face. The one that was not unfamiliar was the clothing.

The clothing that everyone knew.

-- The uniform of government official.

And there were more than one government official. Because just opposite of the man watching over Lu Xiaofeng's door, there was another government official, sleeping on a table.

Evidently they were sleeping in shifts, taking turn to monitor Lu Xiaofeng's movement.

Why government officials?

Were they doing this to get Gong Jiu's reward? Or perhaps they were under order from the Prince of Taiping's Heir Apparent to arrest him?

Lu Xiaofeng rushed to the window. Opening the window, he also saw a pair of government officials, one sleeping, one standing.

Lu Xiaofeng laugh, a wry laugh.

He was already at a loss in dealing with a cat, and now there were a big bunch of kittens. As the mouse, Lu Xiaofeng could only laugh a wry laugh.

Therefore, with no other choice, he lay in bed again, with a filled-to-the-brim wine cup on his chest.

The first rays of morning sun appeared on the horizon.

The government official guarding under the window saw the dawn. He stood up and stretched, happy that the long night was finally over.

He was really relieved.

Lu Xiaofeng had helped him to be relieved.

When he was stretching, just like the ray of sun, Lu Xiaofeng flew toward him and sealed the major acupoint on his body; he was immediately relieved.

Of course the one asleep was also relieved.

Lu Xiaofeng ran his fingers along the saber hanging on his waist, he could not help laughing. It was the first time that he dressed up as a government official.

Lu Xiaofeng could not help admiring Gong Jiu. Only Gong Jiu could force him to disguise himself as someone else.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at the real government official lying on his bed, checked his full attire one more time, and then turned around to leave.

The door. Lu Xiaofeng did not do it, but the door was pushed open.

The one pushing the door and coming in was, surprisingly, Beef Soup.

Beef Soup held a tray in her hands, on the tray was a bowl of steaming hot beef soup, plus four snow white mantou [steamed buns].

Beef Soup put the tray on the table, and gracefully saluted Lu Xiaofeng.

Beef Soup said, "Master Lu of the Yamen, please eat breakfast."

Suddenly Lu Xiaofeng was overwhelmed with a weird feeling, he did not know whether he should laugh or cry. Quickly he took off the government official uniform and said loudly, "I am not Master Lu of the Yamen!"

Beef Soup laughed. "That's right," she said, "In that case, would Lu Xiaofeng, Master Lu, please have some breakfast?"

Lu Xiaofeng still maintain the loud voice, "I don't want to eat!"

"I think it would be better if you eat," Beef Soup said.

"Why do I have to eat?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because Jiu Ge says that he doesn't want to pay you for marking the place you are going to eat breakfast," Beef Soup said.

"He stole that much money," Lu Xiaofeng said, "What's the big deal of spending a bit more?"

"Don't you know one thing?" Beef Soup asked.

"What thing?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Beef Soup said, "The richer you are, the less you are willing to spend

money."

"Hasn't he spent a lot of money to track me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"That was because he had no choice," Beef Soup said, "It was because he simply had to spend some money."

"In that case," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I only have one thing to say."

"What is it?" Beef Soup asked.

"This breakfast, I simply must eat," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Lu Xiaofeng swallowed the last bite of the mantou, he made a show of eating with gusto. "I want to ask you to do something," he said to Beef Soup.

"You want another bowl of beef soup?" Beef Soup asked.

"No," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"So what do you want me to do?" Beef Soup asked.

"Take me to see Gong Jiu," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Beef Soup was hesitant. "Whatever you want to say, you can say to me," she said.

"What I want to say, I have to say it to Gong Jiu in person," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Why?" Beef Soup asked.

"Because that way I can have enjoy a bit of life's pleasure," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Without saying anything, Beef Soup turned around and led him out.

Gong Jiu was not in the hotel. He has never stayed in a hotel.

Gong Jiu was in the carriage.

Gong Jiu lived his daily life within the luxury of his carriage.

He loathed sleeping on the bed other people have slept on, he loathed drinking and eating with the wine cups, chopsticks and bowls that other people have used.

When Lu Xiaofeng entered Gong Jiu's carriage, Gong Jiu was sitting on the driver's seat, meditating.

Seeing Lu Xiaofeng, Gong Jiu did not make any effort to stand up or showing any signs of welcoming him.

He only stared coldly at Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng was also silently staring at Gong Jiu.

And thus these two men were looking at each other like that, as if they were having a martial art match using their gaze.

The first to open his mouth to break the silence was not Gong Jiu.

It was not Lu Xiaofeng either.

It was Beef Soup.

Beef Soup only said six words, "He has something to tell you." And then she walked into the carriage, and pulled the curtains down.

With questioning eyes Gong Jiu fixed his gaze on Lu Xiaofeng.

Finally Lu Xiaofeng opened his mouth. "I have something I want to say to you in person," he said.

"I know," Gong Jiu said.

"You do?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Beef Soup has just told me that," Gong Jiu said.

"Aren't you going to ask what I wanted to say?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I won't," Gong Jiu said.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"You are here," Gong Jiu said, "You will say it."

"What I wanted to say is," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I want you to get rid of your driver."

Gong Jiu's countenance changed a bit. "Why?" he asked.

"You don't need any driver," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"No need any driver, who's going to drive?" Gong Jiu asked.

"Me," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Gong Jiu was surprised, "You?" he asked.

"Me," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Why do you want to be my driver?" Gong Jiu asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Because I want to break away from your pursuit."

Gong Jiu said, "But ..."

Lu Xiaofeng cut him off, "With me being your driver, it means not you following me, but I am taking you out."

"Where do you want to take me?" Gong Jiu asked.

"I don't know either," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Gong Jiu was puzzled, "You don't know?" he asked.

"Perhaps I'll think of some place along the way," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"What place?" Gong Jiu asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "If you want to know the place, you just let me be your driver, and then when along the way I think of the place, I'll immediately let you know."

Gong Jiu did not reply; he picked the horsewhip, and tossed it to Lu Xiaofeng. Pushing the curtain aside, he entered the carriage.

The sun has climbed very high, so high that it nearly reached the zenith.

The midday sun baked the people down on the earth.

Yet Lu Xiaofeng was as calm as the water in a deep lake.

The horsewhip in his hand fluttered lightly over the deep throb of the horses' hooves, the rhythm was extremely lively, not at all like a carriage that was speeding along under the hot sun.

-- Why?

Because Lu Xiaofeng already figured out a way to break away from the evil cat.

The carriage suddenly went very fast.

Inside the carriage, Gong Jiu could not help sticking out his head and asked, "Are you in a hurry?"

Without even looking back, Lu Xiaofeng flicked the horsewhip and said, "That's right."

"Why must you be in a hurry?" Gong Jiu asked.

"Because I want to see someone," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Do you urgently have to see him?" Gong Jiu asked.

"Not urgent," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"If not urgent, why hurry?" Gong Jiu asked.

"Because I have to reach his place before night fall," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"And you still say it's not urgent?" Gong Jiu said.

"I am in no hurry," Lu Xiaofeng said, "He is."

"He is in a hurry?" Gong Jiu was bewildered.

"Because he has a habit," Lu Xiaofeng said, "As soon as it is dark, he does not see any visitor anymore."

"Not even you?" Gong Jiu asked.

"Not even the old emperor of the heavens," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"And that's why you have to see him before dark?" Gong Jiu asked.

"That's right," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"So the one in a hurry is still you," Gong Jiu said.

"Wrong," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Because he is the one making the rules, so the one in a hurry to receive guests before dark is him, not me."

The sun gradually grew weaker. The carriage was slowing down. The light breeze carried with it a sweet floral scent.

Inside the carriage, Gong Jiu asked, "The person you are going to see loves flowers?"

"Extremely," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Is the place where he lives covered with flowers?" Gong Jiu asked.

"All kinds and sorts of flowers," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"What kind of place is that?" Gong Jiu asked.

"Ten-thousand Plum Mountain Villa," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Ximen Chuixue?" Gong Jiu said, "The person you want to see is Ximen Chuixue?"

"That's right," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Although oftentimes he does not blow snow, but blood, but he is indeed called Ximen Chuixue." [Reminder: chui xue means 'blowing snow'; reminder part 2: in Chinese the character for 'snow' is '雪 - xue', the character for 'blood' is '血 - xue', of course, these two characters have different strokes and different pronunciation.]

"What do you want to see him for?" Gong Jiu asked.

"Just to say a few words," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Words that I must not hear?" Gong Jiu asked.

"When he is talking to a friend, he never liked to have any stranger listening on the side," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Are you going to ask him a favor?" Gong Jiu asked.

"Maybe," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"You want him to send words to Sha Man?" Gong Jiu asked.

Lu Xiaofeng did not answer.

The carriage was parked next to a cluster of flowers.

Lu Xiaofeng put down the horsewhip, and jumped down the carriage. Knocking on the curtain he said, "Do you want to come in?"

Gong Jiu replied, "Since he does not like strangers, why would I want to come in? Besides, the scent of flowers is overflowing in here; I am enjoying the beauty of the evening here, won't it be more pleasant?"

"You sure are a smart man," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"You flatter me," Gong Jiu said.

"Since you admitted that you are a smart man, can you guess what am I going to borrow from you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Gong Jiu did not say anything.

Because he could not guess.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "I want to borrow a razorblade from you."

Amidst Lu Xiaofeng's loud laughter, a razorblade flew out from behind the curtain.

Gong Jiu's voice was as cold as a solid block of ice, "You can have it."

When Gong Jiu stuck his head out, Lu Xiaofeng was shaving, his expression was that of a complete bliss.

Gong Jiu could not help asking coldly, "Didn't you say Ximen Chuixue does not receive visitors after dark?"

"Right-o," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"And yet you still leisurely shave like that?" Gong Jiu asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "In all my life I only shave occasionally, hence I want to make sure that I shave comfortably, so that I won't let my moustache down. Furthermore, don't worry, the sun has not disappeared behind the mountain, I guarantee I will finish shaving by then."

"I just want to give you an advice," Gong Jiu said.

"What is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"In my opinion, your four eyebrows look all right," Gong Jiu said, "So I advise you not to shave it."

"But I have to shave," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Why?" Gong Jiu asked.

"Because I have to see Ximen Chuixue," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Do you have to see him?" Gong Jiu asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "If I don't see him, I can't see Sha Man."

"Even if you don't see him, you can still see Sha Man," Gong Jiu said.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at Gong Jiu. "Oh?" he said.

"You don't believe me?" Gong Jiu asked.

"I do," Lu Xiaofeng said, "But I do not dare."

"You don't?" Gong Jiu asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I am afraid that will be the last time I can see Sha Man, or perhaps ..."

"Perhaps what?" Gong Jiu asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Perhaps that will be the last time she can see me."

Gong Jiu laughed. "It's possible that I won't kill both of you," he said.

"Is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"It is possible," Gong Jiu replied.

"And the conditions?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"You are very smart," Gong Jiu said.

"That's why I am still alive," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I want you to join us," Gong Jiu said.

"Is that your own idea?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"No," Gong Jiu replied.

"Is it the Little Old Man's idea?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Correct," Gong Jiu replied.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. He put the razor down, wiped his face dry with a piece of cloth, and then said, "Don't you think I look elegant and unconventional now?"

Gong Jiu looked at him, but he did not say anything.

Lu Xiaofeng lifted up the carriage's curtain and called out, "Beef Soup."

Beef Soup stuck her head out.

Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Don't you think I look better this way compared to before?"

Beef Soup looked at him, she also looked at Gong Jiu. She did not say anything.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "You both must be overwhelmed by how handsome I look, that's why you are speechless. Since I look more elegant and unconventional than before, I think I'd better go see Ximen Chuixue."

The sun disappeared behind the mountain. The evening breeze carried the scent of the flowers, it also caressed Lu Xiaofeng's skin and made him feeling very comfortable.

He took a very deep breath, and then sighed and said, "Such a beautiful day, why must we be locked in constant strife, and insist that the other side must die?"

Gong Jiu snorted coldly.

Lu Xiaofeng continued, "Life is beautiful, why do you persistently force me into a corner? Why don't you hold hand with Beef Soup by the flowers, enjoying a bit of life?"

Gong Jiu's countenance changed a little, he stiffly said, "The sky is turning black."

"I know," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Why didn't Ximen Chuixue come out to welcome you?" Gong Jiu asked.

"Perhaps he is preparing some fine small side dishes to welcome me!" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Are you going to eat dinner inside?" Gong Jiu asked.

"I might spend the night inside," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Then you should hurry up," Gong Jiu said.

"Before I go in, I also want to offer you a bit of advice," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Speak up," Gong Jiu said.

"Quickly cook your dinner," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Lest you smell the aroma, and cannot endure it."

Gong Jiu smiled and said, "I am not a glutton, you need not provoke me. Just enjoy your meal, enjoy your sleep, tomorrow get ready to leave."

"Why do I have to leave?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Because I may decide that I don't want to use you as my driver," Gong Jiu said.

"Actually," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Tomorrow I don't want to be your driver anymore."

"Oh?" Gong Jiu said.

"Tomorrow you will find out," Lu Xiaofeng said, "That I am a free person, I won't have any shadow of the cat's claw behind my back."

"Well, you can see it for yourself tomorrow," Gong Jiu said.

Lu Xiaofeng slowly walked toward the gate, while he happily said, "Tomorrow, what a word full of hope!"

Inside the house, there was no flower, yet it was filled with the fragrance of flowers, light, faint; just like the person of Ximen Chuixue.

Lu Xiaofeng reclined on a couch made of soft dark green velvet, his eyes were fixed on Ximen Chuixue.

Ximen Chuixue's cup was filled with light green jade colored wine, his body was clad in snow white, light and soft clothes.

Like bursts of spring breeze, soft flute sound drifted in, sometimes it seemed so near, sometimes it seemed so far, yet the flute player was unseen.

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "In your life, do you ever have anything to trouble you?" he asked.

"You asked me that same question before," Ximen Chuixue pointed out.

"Then, your answer was no," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"You have a very good memory," Ximen Chuixue said.

"How about now?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I do," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"What trouble?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Moustache," Ximen Chuixue replied.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at Ximen Chuixue's clean and smooth face. "You are troubled because you don't have a beard?"

"No," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"No?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I am troubled because you don't have any moustache," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said, "Why?"

Ximen Chuixue said, "Because last time you begged me to do you a favor, I said that if you shave your moustache, I'd go with you and do whatever you want me to do."

"I remember," Lu Xiaofeng said, "That was the first time I shaved for someone else's sake."

"And now you are clean-shaven again," Ximen Chuixue said, "That's why

I know that my trouble has come again."

Lu Xiaofeng downed his wine in one gulp, and then he looked at Ximen Chuixue.

Ximen Chuixue slowly drank the light green jade colored wine in his cup. "This wine ought to be drunk slowly," he said.

"I know," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Then why did you drink it up in one gulp?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"Because I am waiting for you," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Waiting for me? Waiting for what?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"Waiting for you to say something," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Say what?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"Say something to remove my trouble," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Ximen Chuixue finished his wine in one gulp. Setting down his wine cup, he said, "Whatever you want to do, I'd go with you and do whatever you want me to do."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Now you can pour two cups, we can drink slowly."

Lu Xiaofeng raised his cup and said, "For your words."

Ximen Chuixue also raised his cup and said, "For your moustache."

The two of them roared in laughter, then they slowly sipped their wine.

The flute sound disappeared, the clear, bright sound of guqin[3] appeared in its place.

"Has your preference changed?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"It hasn't," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Then why guqin?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"The flute is melodious," Ximen Chuixue explained, "Its washing power is not as strong as guqin's strong sound."

"Washing power?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Washing what?"

"Murderous aura," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Washing murderous aura?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Ximen Chuixue nodded.

"Whose murderous aura?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"The person on the carriage," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"You can feel his murderous aura?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"A very thick murderous aura," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Do you know whom he is going to kill?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Definitely not me," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"It's not me either," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Who else then?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"There is Honest Monk, and then there is Sha Man, and Xiao Yu too," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"I have two questions," Ximen Chuixue said.

"What questions?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"First," Ximen Chuixue said, "Why did he want to kill Honest Monk?"

"And the second question?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Who are Sha Man and Xiao Yu?" Ximen Chuixue said.

By the time Lu Xiaofeng finished narrating his experience, the wine pot on the table was empty, the dishes have been cleared up.

Ximen Chuixue stared at Lu Xiaofeng; there was a look of reproach in his eyes.

"You get in trouble a lot," Ximen Chuixue said.

"That's why I came to find you," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"I know how to deal with it," Ximen Chuixue said, "You'd better have a good sleep tonight, so that you can hasten on your journey in the morning."

"Can I say just two words?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"No, you can't," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because I already know which two words you are going to say," Ximen Chuixue said.

"You do?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I do," Ximen Chuixue replied. After taking another sip at his wine he said, "I'd rather you keep those two words in your heart."

"In that case, I'll keep the two words 'many thanks' in my heart!" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed while raising his cup and finished off his wine.

[1] Comic dialog, sketches, crosstalk, as in performing on stage.

[2] See Lu Xiao Feng, Book 1 - The Golden Roc Empire, translated by Moinllieon.

[3] Guqin (from dictionary): a long zither with 5 or 7 strings, plucked with a plectrum / the ancestor of the long zither family, dating back to pre-classical times (playing it was an essential accomplishment of a Confucian gentleman).

Chapter 19 – How to escape from a trap.

Early morning.

Fog, light fog.

Smelling the fragrance of flowers in the morning breeze, watching the hazy silhouette of flowers in the fog, was a very invigorating thing. Too bad those who wake up early are not many.

Lu Xiaofeng usually woke up early, but he did not have time to leisurely go to the flower garden to watch the flowers, to smell the flowers, in the fog.

Gong Jiu was a man who knew how to enjoy life, but he did not know how to enjoy life in good taste, he would rather have more sleep to restore his energy, so he was unwilling to enjoy the refreshing mist.

Beef Soup was a woman, and women usually love flowers under the moon, love sunrise and sunset. Unfortunately, the man she was with was Gong Jiu, a man who loved to sleep until the sky is bright. The woman by his side had no choice but stay with him in bed until the sky was bright.

Therefore, there was only one person who can enjoy the beauty of the early morning.

Clothes as white as snow, in white misty fog, like a stone statue Ximen Chuixue stood by the flowers.

The fog dispersed. The sun gave up its warmth. The birds started to sing.

Ximen Chuixue no longer stood by the flowers.

He stood by the carriage, Gong Jiu's carriage.

A burst of murderous aura suddenly entered the carriage, Gong Jiu suddenly sat up.

Pushing the curtain aside, Gong Jiu saw Ximen Chuixue.

The Ximen Chuixue, who was standing coldly and eerily.

And then, Gong Jiu saw Lu Xiaofeng.

The Lu Xiaofeng, who was giggling and waving his hand as he went away.

Lu Xiaofeng did not go fast at all, but in no time at all Lu Xiaofeng's shadow was getting smaller and smaller.

Gong Jiu pulled the rope, but the carriage did not move.

Ximen Chuixue drew his sword, stabbed the horse, and put the sword back into its sheathe; quick as lightning.

It was the first time Gong Jiu saw such a fast sword.

Lu Xiaofeng's shadow was getting smaller. Ximen Chuixue's murderous aura was getting thicker.

Gong Jiu did not look at Lu Xiaofeng, he looked at Ximen Chuixue's eyes.

Ximen Chuixue's eyes were also fixed at Gong Jiu's eyes.

"Why did you kill my horse?" Gong Jiu asked.

"I don't want your horse to pursue my friend," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"What if I want to pursue him?" Gong Jiu asked.

"You may end up just like your horse," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Humph," Gong Jiu snorted, "You have confidence?"

Ximen Chuixue said, "Ximen Chuixue is the most confident person in Jianghu."

"Really?" Gong Jiu asked.

"You want to try?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

Gong Jiu did not answer, he was overwhelmed by Ximen Chuixue's murderous aura that he broke into a cold silence.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt that this world was actually very lovely. The singing of the birds was bright and refreshing, the breeze caressing his body felt really nice, even the weeds growing by the road looked beautiful.

Friends. It was the most delightful thing in the world.

Friendship. It was the most essential thing in the world.

The friendship between Lu Xiaofeng and Ximen Chuixue was merely a friendship between gentlemen, it was as insipid as the water; yet, when Lu Xiaofeng was in trouble, Ximen Chuixue was always willing to lend his blade to help.

Although he might ask Lu Xiaofeng to shave his moustache, what's the big deal about shaving moustache anyway? After the moustache was shaved, won't the man become more clear and bright? Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng was still grateful toward Ximen Chuixue.

Lu Xiaofeng knew that Gong Jiu would definitely be unable to catch up with him.

He stopped, took a deep breath to fill his lungs with the cool early morning mountain air. Stroking his fingers over the place above his lips

where his moustache used to be, he laughed.

Because he remembered Sha Man. When Sha Man saw that he only had two eyebrows left, she must be shocked.

But the one who would be shocked the most ought to be Honest Monk. Because he would never expect that Lu Xiaofeng would really shave his moustache; moreover, that he did it to escape from the chase, although the one pursuing him was not the government officers under Prince Taiping's Heir Apparent command.

Gong Jiu was a lot more formidable than Prince Taiping's Heir Apparent. Lu Xiaofeng would never be afraid of a hundred government officers, yet he was afraid of one Gong Jiu.

Gong Jiu's martial art and intelligence were simply frightening. Could Ximen Chuixue hold Gong Jiu back? Could Ximen Chuixue defeat Gong Jiu?

Lu Xiaofeng had just started to move his feet, moving forward, but he suddenly stopped again.

What if Ximen Chuixue was not Gong Jiu's match?

There was a faint uneasy feeling floating in the depth of Lu Xiaofeng's heart.

-- If Ximen Chuixue met some mishaps, won't I be guilty?

The more Lu Xiaofeng thought about it, the stronger the uneasy feeling in his guts.

-- Ximen Chuixue faced Gong Jiu for my sake, why did I avoid the problem by running away from it? Either a friend is willing to sacrifice his life, or both sides are perishing together, how can I let Ximen Chuixue sacrifice his life alone?

Thinking to this point, like an arrow, Lu Xiaofeng flew.

Not a flying forward arrow, but a flying backward arrow.

It was noon.

The sun was shining high in the sky. There was no wind.

Butterflies were flying among the clusters of flowers.

But the one flying outside the clusters of flowers was not a butterfly; it was a fly.

Not just a regular housefly, but a big fly with a green head, the one making buzzing noise.

Seeing the fly, Lu Xiaofeng smelled the scent of blood.

The horse was not there, the carriage was not there, the people were not there either.

Lu Xiaofeng dashed into Ximen Chuixue's house.

The furniture in the house was still as tidy as usual, everything was as spotless as before. But where was Ximen Chuixue?

In that entire house, other than Lu Xiaofeng, no one was in sight.

A gust of wind suddenly blew into the room, Lu Xiaofeng could not help shivering a little bit.

Has the big mistake really happened?

Lu Xiaofeng walked out of the house, he walked toward the bloodstained ground, and reached out with his palm to slap repeatedly.

The buzzing flies suddenly did not make any noise, one after another the flies dropped dead in the pool of blood.

Only the butterflies remained. The butterflies were still fluttering among the flowers, they fluttered erratically up, down, left and right.

The flowers were no longer fragrant, the butterflies were no longer beautiful.

Lu Xiaofeng stared blankly at the pool of blood on the ground, as if he had lost his soul.

"Are you paying homage to your dead horse?"

By the time this sentence entered Lu Xiaofeng's ears, a hand also landed on his shoulder.

The voice belonged to Ximen Chuixue. The hand was also the exceptionally well-groomed hand belonging to Ximen Chuixue. Lu Xiaofeng looked at him with a blank look on his face.

To Lu Xiaofeng, Ximen Chuixue's smile was a lot warmer than the sun.

"It's not your blood?"

"If it was, would I still be able to stand right here?" Ximen Chuixue said.

"Oh, right. This must be the horse's blood," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Why did you hurry back?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"I was afraid," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"You were afraid I would fall into Gong Jiu's evil scheme?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

Lu Xiaofeng nodded.

Ximen Chuixue put both hands on Lu Xiaofeng's shoulder, and shook him vigorously several times. "Just because of this, next time you come to me for a favor, I don't want you to shave your moustache anymore."

Lu Xiaofeng let out a wry laugh. This was the true value of friendship!

Lu Xiaofeng looked at the blood on the ground. "You really gave me a fright," he said.

"You thought I died?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"Yes," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Why?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"Because you are a man who loves cleanliness," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Why would you let a pool of blood remain in front of your house?"

Ximen Chuixue laughed and said, "Naturally I cannot stand it either, but I did not have time to clean up."

"You don't have time?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"That's right," Ximen Chuixue replied, "I did not have time to cleanup, and you already arrived."

"And before I came?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I went to the riverbank to throw up," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Throw up?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "As in vomiting?"

Ximen Chuixue nodded.

"Why did you throw up?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because I saw someone," Ximen Chuixue replied, "His action was so nauseating that it made me sick."

"Who?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Gong Jiu," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Gong Jiu?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "What did he do?"

"He begged me to beat him up," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Did you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"No," Ximen Chuixue replied, "When martial art masters are facing each other, they cannot be careless at all. I thought he intentionally wanted to

break my concentration."

"And then what happened?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"And then he suddenly raised his own hand to strike his own face," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"And you still ignored him?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"You are right," Ximen Chuixue said, "I was still staring at him like before."

"And then what did he do?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"He pulled a whip," Ximen Chuixue said.

"Whose whip?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Beef Soup's," Ximen Chuixue replied, "Beef Soup beat him incessantly, he rolled around on the ground, shouting in glee."

"And what did you do?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I ran to the riverbank at once," Ximen Chuixue said, "I threw up big time. Otherwise ..."

"Otherwise what?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Otherwise I would throw up on the ground, and then I could not live here anymore," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"I am afraid I will have to pay for your house then," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Do you know how much this house of mine is worth?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"How much?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Do you know Huo Xiu?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

How could he not know Huo Xiu? How could he not know the richest person in the world, but loved to pass life like a hermit, the reclusive old fellow Huo? [See Lu Xiaofeng Book 1, The Golden Roc Empire, translated by Moinllieon.]

He still remembered it clearly, one time he was lying in bed comfortably, drinking wine; suddenly he was visited by three strange, yet very famous men of Jianghu. One was someone who thought about 'feelings are always like leftover hatred, no point in bring up past matters' all day long, the 'Jade-faced Gentleman' Liu Yuheng. Next was someone who thought about 'the autumn rains and autumn winds brings worries' all day long, the 'Intestine Breaking Swordsman' Xiao Qiuyu. And the last one was the 'Thousand-li Loner' Dugu Fang.

Actually, it was very rare that these three men were together, what was more surprising was that not only they were together, but they had become Princess Danfeng's bodyguards.

When Princess Danfeng also entered his room, and suddenly knelt down in front of him, he crashed through the roof to run away. The place where he decided to hide from Princess Danfeng was precisely Huo Xiu's residence. It was a wooden cabin, yet priceless.

Because it was originally the summer retreat of the famous poet Lu Fangweng, the walls still had some of his poems, which he penned with his own hand.

But in an instant the house was demolished by Liu Yuheng, Xiao Qiuyu and Dugu Fang.

Princess Danfeng immediately took action; she compensated Huo Xiu with fifty taels of gold.

Fifty taels of gold could buy quite a few houses!

But Lu Xiaofeng believed that the wooden cabin worth thirty, forty thousand taels of gold.

Right now Ximen Chuixue suddenly brought up this matter, could it be that he also believed that his house worth that much gold?

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng expressed what was in his mind, "Are you saying that your house is comparable to the old man Huo's residence?"

But Ximen Chuixue shook his head, "You are wrong."

"I am?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Ximen Chuixue said, "I only said that any house could be priceless."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Ximen Chuixue replied, "Because the people in the house maybe one day shake the four corners of the world."

"You are absolutely right," Lu Xiaofeng said, "That wooden cabin of old man Huo's, when it was still Lu Fangweng's residence, it was no more than a pile of lumber put together to make a house. But after Lu Fangweng's poems received the acclamation of the world, by the time it became the old man Huo's residence, it became priceless."

"Therefore," Ximen Chuixue said, "Even if I cannot live here, you can't afford to compensate for my loss."

"You are wrong," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I can afford it."

"Oh?" Ximen Chuixue said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Because practically I do not need to pay you right now; hundreds of years later, later generation's people would know that during Ximen Chuixue's time, I have already become as light as a feather

and ascend to heaven, I have become an immortal."

Ximen Chuixue said, "Now I know that you can act unreasonably and shamelessly."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "Even if that is true, it won't implicate you at all, because right now you won't move out."

"This time you are wrong," Ximen Chuixue said.

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I am about to move away," Ximen Chuixue said.

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because," Ximen Chuixue said, "You are going to live here."

"I am?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Ximen Chuixue explained, "Gong Jiu must have thought that you were gone, he would never expect that you came back. Therefore, no matter how many eyes and ears he sends out, no matter where his eyes and ears are, he will never find your whereabouts."

"Because I already have my head on your pillow here without any worry," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Absolutely right," Ximen Chuixue said.

"But what about you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I am leaving," Ximen Chuixue said.

"Where?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I am studying Buddhism," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Studying Buddhism?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "With whom?"

"Naturally with a monk," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Which monk?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Honest Monk!" Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Does Honest Monk understand Buddhism?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I don't know," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"You don't know?" Lu Xiaofeng said, "Yet you still want to study Buddhism from him?"

"I just want to learn one trick from him," Ximen Chuixue said.

"Which trick?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Meditation," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Meditation?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "What for?"

"So that when I am with two great beauties, my heart won't be like a frisky monkey, my mind won't be like a cantering horse," Ximen Chuixue replied.

"Who are those two great beauties?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"One is called Sha Man, the other Xiao Yu," Ximen Chuixue replied.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. "Are you saying that you want to pick them up and bring them here?" he asked.

"Do you have any other safer and better way?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"I do," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Please enlighten me," Ximen Chuixue said.

"But momentarily we cannot do it," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"What is it?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"Kill Gong Jiu," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Lu Xiaofeng had high confidence in Ximen Chuixue's character, he had high confidence in his capability, he had high confidence in his martial art skill. Therefore, he peacefully and cozily lay in front of the house, enjoying the fragrance of the flowers, the sunshine, the light breeze, and the elegantly fluttering butterflies.

Lu Xiaofeng's mind was also fluttering up and down like the butterflies, until it finally landed on Sha Man.

He longed to see Sha Man.

He suddenly felt a strong urge to retire from Jianghu.

He had been in Jianghu for a long time, indeed too long. Although he was still young, and his heart was still burning with passion, but suddenly he felt that Jianghu was sinister and deceitful, the smell of fierce, bloody rivalry was becoming too thick.

He only hoped to be together with Sha Man, find a small island, perhaps return to the Little Old Man's island, and live in Sha Man's former house, no longer care about right and wrong, gratitude and grudges, no longer carry a sword.

He looked at his hand.

-- If not carrying a sword, what should he carry?

-- Eyebrow pencil?

He could not help laughing.

And then he heard noises.

Not the sound of his laughter, but the sound of horses' hooves on the ground.

Not just one horse, not even two, three, or four horses, but the sound of a dozen, maybe more than twenty horses, galloping on the ground.

He sprang up.

By the time the sound of galloping horses was getting clearer and clearer, it was getting more and more resounding, Lu Xiaofeng had made a decision.

Therefore, 'whoosh!' he hid himself into a cluster of flowers.

-- Who were these people?

That was the first question popping out in Lu Xiaofeng's mind as he was

hiding in the cluster of flowers.

-- Did Ximen Chuixue betray him?

That was the second question in Lu Xiaofeng's mind in the cluster of flowers.

Out of these two questions, he would find out the answer to at least one question very soon.

Because the galloping horses had stopped in front of Ximen Chuixue's door.

Exactly twenty horses, twenty riders.

Twenty riders who had just jumped down their horses. Twenty big, burly men in black.

Lu Xiaofeng recognized one of them. The leader.

Ying Yan Laoqi!

The leader was precisely the Zongpiaobazi of the Twelve-Dock Alliance, Ying Yan Laoqi.

-- Who was Ying Yan Laoqi looking for?

-- Did he look for Ximen Chuixue or Lu Xiaofeng?

-- What for?

Lu Xiaofeng only knew one thing: the one Ying Yan Laoqi was looking for, was not him, but Ximen Chuixue.

Because when he knocked the door, Ying Yan Laoqi said, "Ying Yan Laoqi of the Twelve-Dock Alliance is seeking audience with Ximen Gongzi."

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng got the answer to his second question: Ximen Chuixue did not betray him.

He suddenly felt ashamed.

He repeatedly admonished himself in his heart, "Toward a friend, you must have trust, you must have confidence."

Therefore, he took a very deep breath to suck the scent of the flowers.

He still had some reservation in his heart that he did not feel comfortable in sitting or lying back down. Instead, unleashing his qinggong, he flew toward the direction Ying Yan Laoqi disappeared.

Because he still had one big question.

-- Why did Ying Yan Laoqi look for Ximen Chuixue?

Ying Yan Laoqi was the Zongpiaobazi of the Twelve-Dock Alliance. The Twelve-Dock Alliance's power reached far and wide, even beyond the Great Wall. He had subordinates from both the 'white and black' ways. No matter where he went, Ying Yan Laoqi would always have a secure place to stay, he would be warmly greeted by local people of both the 'white and black' ways.

Therefore, the place Ying Yan Laoqi picked to rest ought to be a large town or perhaps a large village.

But Lu Xiaofeng was wrong this time. Big mistake, very peculiar mistake.

Because as Lu Xiaofeng followed the horses' track, he suddenly realized that the direction Ying Yan Laoqi and his people took was not a big town at all.

The place where they stopped was nowhere in particular, it was as if as soon as they felt tired, they found a random place where they could sit down and rest.

It was no more than a rather spacious, open space among the twists and turns of the road.

They all dismounted and gathered into a group. Watched from afar, it appeared that they were talking about some confidential matter.

Once again Lu Xiaofeng found out that he was mistaken. They did not

talk about anything at all, but they gathered around a pot-stewed dish, eating and drinking as much as they liked.

The sun had already passed the zenith. Lu Xiaofeng found out that his own stomach was grumbling. But he could not sit down to eat.

Not that he was afraid they might detect his presence, and not that he did not have time to eat either; rather, he did not bring anything to eat.

The only thing he brought was silver to buy things to eat.

On this remote mountain path, silver had no use at all. Therefore, he could only hide nearby, watching them eating.

Nor only he was able to see them stuffing themselves, he could even hear the sound of their conversation.

"What do you say tonight, the two of us brothers, doubling our capital, and then go to find Chun Hong and Tao Niang to have some fun?"

"Double your big ghost head!"

"Hey, what's wrong with you?"

"Do you know what I am most afraid of in all my life?"

"What is it?"

"Caressing door's nail. There was one time I was on mission, I did not find the person I was looking for, as a result, when I pushed several Paijiu [pai gow] tiles, ha! Do you know what happened? For twenty-seven times in a row, all I picked was 'departing ten' [i.e. 'zero']."

"So when you did not find Ximen Chuixue today, you don't want to gamble?"

"Absolutely not."

"I'll say you'd better gamble still."

"Why?"

"Because if you saw Ximen Chuixue, I am afraid you may not necessarily have any chance to gamble anymore."

"You think we can't kill him?"

"I am afraid that's just not possible."

"Impossible."

"You are so confident?"

"Of course; there are twenty of us, while he does not guard against us."

Suddenly we launch twenty different secret projectiles, I'll say even an immortal will find it difficult to dodge, much less just an ordinary person."

Lu Xiaofeng knew what was going on.

Because Ximen Chuixue blocked Gong Jiu, Lu Xiaofeng was able to escape his grip. Therefore, Gong Jiu harbored hard feelings against Ximen Chuixue, and sent Ying Yan Laoqi to plot against Ximen Chuixue.

It was the most likely scenario. And it also proved one thing.

Gong Jiu was really unable to trace Lu Xiaofeng's whereabouts, *i.e.* because Lu Xiaofeng went back to check on Ximen Chuixue, he was able to break away from Gong Jiu's pursuit.

It also proved another thing.

During his journey, nobody recognized Ximen Chuixue.

Lu Xiaofeng was relieved. He knew that he only need to do one more thing, and then he could sit back and relax outside Ximen Chuixue's door, waiting for Ximen Chuixue fetching Sha Man and the others.

Although Ying Yan Laoqi was not addicted to gambling, sometimes he also satisfied his cravings by placing a few high stakes.

But tonight, he only opened his eyes wide, staring at his subordinates

having a few rounds of gambling. He did not have the slightest moods to partake the game.

Although his wine capacity could not be considered very good, sometimes he drank ten to twenty bowls brimming to the edge with shaodaozi [lit. burning knife; not sure, probably type of wine] without getting drunk.

But tonight he only drank two bowls, and he already felt tipsy.

People with a load in their mind usually get drunk rather easily.

People with a load in their mind usually don't have the mood to gamble.

Ying Yan Laoqi was actually a very open-minded man; no matter what happened, he rarely took it to heart.

But tonight he had a load in his mind; not only tonight, but these days he had a load in his mind.

Ever since he took the wrong step, he had been having a load in his mind. This worry has depressed him.

He was already the Zongpiaobazi of the Twelve-Dock Alliance, why did he accept Gong Jiu's provocation?

He worried that one day, his fate would be the same as Ye Xingshi.

Because in this earth, he was the only person remained who knew Gong Jiu's secret.

Actually, he was not supposed to know Gong Jiu's secret.

Based on his advanced years, based on his family's wealth, he should not be worried about anything. Why is it that in that moment he could not resist the temptation of vast amount of money and thus he fell under Gong Jiu's control?

That much money, what good would it bring? Did he really want to bring everything in his coffin after he died?

Lu Xiaofeng has always been a warm hearted man, always attached importance to yiqi [spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice, code of brotherhood], always emphasized benevolence. When this heist broke out, the first person came into Ying Yan Laoqi's mind he wanted to ask for help was precisely Lu Xiaofeng.

But now, Ying Yan Laoqi had to take his order from Gong Jiu, he had to track Lu Xiaofeng's whereabouts; and when Gong Jiu said to kill, he vehemently must kill such a hero.

Although Ximen Chuixue was not a man of great benevolence, great valor, he had never killed the innocent. Based on this fact alone, it was enough for him to receive admiration from Jianghu people.

But now, Ying Yan Laoqi had received order to kill Ximen Chuixue.

Therefore, he lifted his bowl again, and downed the wine in one gulp.

Therefore, he did not even know when the gambling was over, not the slightest idea.

When he awoke, he found that he was crouching on the table. The huge tavern was completely deserted, and he was awake with some kind of drowsiness.

And then, he realized that his saber was missing.

And then, he found out that there was a piece of paper in front of him.

The piece of paper said:

Ximen Chuixue Chang'an. [Ancient name of Xi'an, the capital of China during Tang Dynasty.]

Chapter 20 – Honest Monk is not honest

Saber. The saber flickered under the bright morning sun.

Lu Xiaofeng had the saber in his hand.

Lu Xiaofeng was toying with the saber in his hand. It caught the sun light at just the right angle and shot a blinding light to Lu Xiaofeng's eyes.

He held the saber flat, vertical, in an angle, and tried fifteen, sixteen different angles, and found fourteen of them could reflect light.

He suddenly laughed, he laughed at what he found from this experiment.

If someday he had to use saber in dealing with the enemy, he might try using this technique of reflecting light first to disturb the enemy's eyes. If the enemy was disturbed, he would undoubtedly win. Therefore, he was grateful to Ying Yan Laoqi.

Were it not for Ying Yan Laoqi carrying the saber, were it not for Ying Yan Laoqi got drunk and crouched on the table, were it not for Lu Xiaofeng leaving a brief note to Ying Yan Laoqi, he would have not taken Ying Yan Laoqi's saber, and thus he would have not discovered this principle.

Gently running his fingers along the blade, Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt

very proud of himself and laughed.

-- If I did not leave the note, if I did not pick his saber, if I did not play with the saber under the sun, would I discover this fact?

-- Therefore, I should be proud of myself, why would I be grateful to Ying Yan Laoqi?

Lu Xiaofeng laughed even more complacently.

-- Right now, Ying Yan Laoqi should be leading his men pursuing to Chang'an, shouldn't he?

Ying Yan Laoqi had no reason not to go to Chang'an. Anybody in his situation would surely go to Chang'an.

If he believed the note, he would go.

If he did not believe the note, he would still go.

Because the person leaving the note was able to take his life anytime, how could he not go?

Besides, Lu Xiaofeng did not deceive him, because Lu Xiaofeng only wrote 'Ximen Chuixue Chang'an', with a space between the words 'Ximen Chuixue' and 'Chang'an'.

The space could have three words, 'is not in'.

-- Ximen Chuixue 'is not in' Chang'an.

The space could also hold two words.

-- Ximen Chuixue 'maybe in' Chang'an.

That was the beauty of space.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly thought of ancient paintings, why were there so many blank spaces? Turned out those blank spaces had even more layers of explanation, everybody can admire the paintings according to their own interpretation, their own criticism, their own guess as to the creative concept behind the paintings.

But there was only one creative concept behind Lu Xiaofeng's note:

-- Ximen Chuixue practically is not in Chang'an.

-- Ximen Chuixue should be going to Sha Man and the others' hiding place, shouldn't he?

Lu Xiaofeng counted the date. Ximen Chuixue should have found Sha Man by now.

But Ximen Chuixue did not find Sha Man.

The first thing that Ximen Chuixue saw as an overhanging cliff, and the angry waves crashing the shore under the overhanging cliff, the foam of water splashing into the overhanging cliff.

And then he saw the wooden cabin Lu Xiaofeng told him about. He loved this place.

When he saw the overhanging cliff and the splashing waves, he recalled Su Dongpo's[1] poem.

-- Raging waves beating the shore, rolling up thousand piles of snow.
Picturesque rivers and mountains, coupled with many heroes.

This was the perfect place to live in seclusion.

Now Ximen Chuixue regretted why he promised Lu Xiaofeng that he would bring Sha Man back to him.

-- Why didn't he promise Lu Xiaofeng that he would stay here to protect them? That way he could stay here, he could enjoy the sea breeze, enjoy the scene of the splashing waves here.

Although he had regrets, he still walked toward the wooden cabin, without the slightest hesitation.

Wherever Ximen Chuixue went, he would never forget his noble character, his elegance.

Although there was only a single wooden cabin on the overhanging cliff, he would still remember to display his noble character.

Therefore, although the door to the wooden cabin was half-closed, he still knocked on the door.

Although he would always wait for someone to answer the door, or perhaps to invite him in before he would enter in, this time he had to make an exception.

There are always exceptions to everything.

For example, if he knocked the door several dozen times without anybody answering the door.

Or perhaps if he suddenly smell blood.

Not only has Ximen Chuixue knocked the door fifty, sixty times, without any response, he also smelled the reeking of blood.

Therefore, he had to make an exception.

Therefore, he pushed the door open. Stealthily like a cat he slipped inside.

In the hall, apart from a wooden table, some wooden chairs, tea cups, tea pot, he saw nothing else.

Ximen Chuixue had not even broken into the rooms. He called out twice, "Anyone here?" And only then he burst into the inner rooms.

In the first room, he saw wooden bed, quilt, pillow, but nothing else.

The second room was just a duplicate of the first room.

The third room had one person in it. A dead person. And the dead person was a woman.

Ximen Chuixue burst in. He turned the woman over, and to his surprise, he discovered two things.

-- This woman was Xiao Yu, because Lu Xiaofeng described Sha Man's appearance to him, and this woman's appearance did not match that description.

-- This woman did not die, because there was a very weak moan coming from her throat.

By the time Ximen Chuixue brought Xiao Yu back to his carriage, he discovered another thing.

-- Xiao Yu's right hand was curled into a tight fist.

He pried Xiao Yu's right hand open. A ball of crumpled paper fell down. The piece of paper had seven characters written on it. Seven characters

written in blood.

- Lao shi he shang bu lao shi [Honest Monk is not honest].

Lu Xiaofeng did not know a misfortune has happened in the wooden cabin on the overhanging cliff.

Lu Xiaofeng did not know Sha Man and Honest Monk had disappeared.

Lu Xiaofeng did not know Xiao Yu was stabbed and was seriously injured.

Lu Xiaofeng did not know that in order to save Xiao Yu, Ximen Chuixue did not hurry back. Not only he did not hurry, he had to find a small town where he could stay and invite a physician to treat Xiao Yu's injury. Therefore, by the time Ximen Chuixue was supposed to be back, he did not even see any shadow of a horse carriage. A dark shadow started to creep into his heart.

-- Could it be that Ximen Chuixue has met some mishaps?

-- Could it be that Sha Man has met some mishaps?

-- Could it be that all of them have met some mishaps?

From its zenith, the sun slowly crawled down to the west, and then it slowly disappeared beyond the western horizon. Lu Xiaofeng was still shrouded under the blanket of questions.

The crescent moon slowly climbed to the middle of the sky, Lu Xiaofeng was still sitting in front of the door, anxiously craning his neck to look at the distance.

He was fidgety with anxiety and was burning with angst. Only one person understood the extent of Lu Xiaofeng's concern.

Ximen Chuixue understood Lu Xiaofeng's concern. Because he knew Lu Xiaofeng's expectation.

But he really had no way of hurrying back. Not that he did not want to hurry back, but he practically could not hurry back.

Xiao Yu had lost a lot of blood, she needed time to recuperate; she must not suffer the hardship of the tossing and turning of traveling with the carriage.

Therefore, although Ximen Chuixue understood Lu Xiaofeng's anxiety, in all honesty there was absolutely nothing he could do about it; not that he himself was not in a hurry to get back.

The meaning of the seven characters that Xiao Yu held tight in her hand, 'Honest Monk is not honest', was very clear; Sha Man's disappearance, Xiao Yu's injury, must be deeply related to Honest Monk. But what was it? Where was Honest Monk?

Ximen Chuixue really wanted to see Lu Xiaofeng as soon as possible, he wanted to hand over all these questions in his mind to Lu Xiaofeng, and

let him deal with it himself. However, Xiao Yu's countenance was deathly pale; even lying motionless in bed, she was continuously groaning in pain, how could Ximen Chuixue have the heart to go?

Besides, he really did not dare to leave Xiao Yu alone and let the doctor took care of her.

Therefore, he only had one option – waiting.

Lu Xiaofeng had been waiting impatiently for three days. Three days ago, he was already dying to go and look for them. Because three days ago he thought that at the latest, Ximen Chuixue should have been back three days previously.

To be able to wait for six days, Lu Xiaofeng's patience was really not bad. About this fact, he could not help but admiring himself.

Therefore, by the time he was ready to move his feet, he had made a decision.

He decided to admire himself one more day. Because admiring himself was not an easy thing to do.

Today was the last day Lu Xiaofeng admiring his own patience.

Today was the ninth day, not the seventh day. Because Lu Xiaofeng had waited two more days.

In these two days he had attempted to leave a hundred and twenty four times. But all hundred and twenty four times attempts were not successful.

Because every time he wanted to leave, a dreadful thought emerged in his mind.

-- What if he had just left and Ximen Chuixue arrived with Sha Man?

-- What would happen if Sha Man arrived and did not see him?

Therefore, he stayed. Waiting. Waiting painfully.

Dusk. Dusk has always been a very pleasant time.

Because dusk has always been the time when love ones are going to see each other.

The farmers tilling the soil went home with hoes on their shoulder, facing the fiery sunsets, walking along the raised path between the rice field, going home to be with their family.

People from all walks of life, when they saw the setting sun, they all would know that it was time to rest. One day of weariness was finally going to get relief.

Lovers who were going to meet each other would also begin to dress up in preparation to meet their sweetheart later on that evening.

Only one type of person was not happy when the night falls.

-- One who has to wait.

Lu Xiaofeng was waiting. But under the sunset glow, a smile suddenly appeared on his face.

Because his wait was over.

Because he heard the sound of speeding carriage.

Because he saw that the speeding carriage was Ximen Chuixue's.

Therefore, the dusk this time was the kind of dusk that brought delight in Lu Xiaofeng's heart.

Lu Xiaofeng's happiness was comparable to the splendid red sunset clouds on the horizon, which stayed in the sky for a while, and then gradually faded away.

Because what he saw were a hardened face of Ximen Chuixue's, and a pale face of Xiao Yu's.

Although Lu Xiaofeng was anxious, he did not want to rush Xiao Yu; he merely endure patiently while with a weak voice Xiao Yu narrated the story of Honest Monk was not honest.

-- One day, Honest Monk suddenly said that he had a business he had to take care of for a few days; hence leaving me and Sha Man in that wooden cottage he went out.

-- And then after seven, eight days, Honest Monk returned.

-- When he returned, I was not there, because I was out collecting shells.

-- I came back, happy and excited, with shells in my hand, and called out Sha Man's name in loud voice.

-- Sha Man did not respond.

-- I saw Honest Monk carrying Sha Man.

-- Sha Man did not even struggle. My guess is that she was caught off guard and had her acupoints sealed by Honest Monk.

-- I shouted to Honest Monk, asking him what he was doing.

-- He said nothing, but flashed a lewd smile instead.

-- I rushed toward him.

-- Suddenly he dropped Sha Man, fetched the sword hanging on the

wall, and stabbed me.

-- His martial art skill was frightening.

-- He probably thought he had killed me.

-- I also thought that I was going to die.

-- That's why before I die, I wrote those seven characters.

"And then what happened?" Lu Xiaofeng could not bear not to ask.

"And then I woke up here," said Xiao Yu.

Among the 'Four Great Monks', Honest Monk ranked third.

Whether Honest Monk was really honest or not, nobody knew. But everybody knew that his martial art skill was high; it was definitely not a fake. Anybody who provoked him would suddenly die in the night, without any rhyme or reason.

Honest Monk had disappeared from the Jianghu for half a year, not a single person knew what he was doing.

The first time Lu Xiaofeng saw Honest Monk in the last half year was precisely on the island, when Honest Monk suddenly popped out from the chest.

Lu Xiaofeng began to suspect something.

-- Did Honest Monk get caught and was stuffed into the chest?

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly recalled the conversation he had with Honest Monk on the island:

"Why hasn't Monk left yet?"

"Why haven't you left?"

"I cannot find my way out."

"If even you cannot find your way out, what hope does Monk have?"

"Why did Monk come here?"

"If Monk does not enter hell, who would enter hell?"

"So you knew this place is hell? What are you doing in hell? What kind of man is that Ninth Master? How did he put you inside the chest?"

Honest Monk did not answer.

"Since you knew, why didn't you say anything?"

Honest Monk mumbled, "Mysteries of heaven must not be revealed. Buddha said: must not speak, must not speak."

Lu Xiaofeng knew that Honest Monk must know the island's secret very well.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly remembered something:

-- Has Honest Monk been bought by the Little Old Man and has become an invisible man?

Lu Xiaofeng also recalled two more things:

-- Honest Monk was hiding under Sha Man's bed, and he taught Sha Man and him how to escape from the island.

-- On the ship Honest Monk has saved them once.

A question floated up in Lu Xiaofeng's mind:

-- Why was it that the escape that Lu Xiaofeng had planned did not work, but the one that Honest Monk had planned did?

A dark shadow flitted across Lu Xiaofeng's heart:

-- Was it a conspiracy between Honest Monk and Gong Jiu?

Lu Xiaofeng immediately thought about the key question:

-- For what reason?

If Gong Jiu wanted to kill him, he could have killed him on the island.

Based on the way Gong Jiu handled his affairs, it was impossible for him to be careless and let Lu Xiaofeng and Sha Man and the others escaped to the ship. It was even more impossible for him to let them escaped from the ship and back to the Mainland!

It was absolutely impossible!

Another similar question emerged in Lu Xiaofeng's mind:

-- In the end, what is his real objective?

Since Gong Jiu deliberately let him return to the Mainland, why did he scheme to frame Lu Xiaofeng up, and press him to a corner?

-- Honest Monk this time abducted Sha Man, what for?

Lu Xiaofeng looked up at the blue dome of the sky, he felt as if his heart was tied knot after knot.

Clouds floating in, clouds floating away, the sky was still as blue as

always.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt a burst of great waves arose in his heart. In his shock, he found a great truth:

-- The sky has never changed, but the clouds are always changing.

-- This matter was similar: Honest Monk and Gong Jiu, they were like the cloud, they simply wanted to change the appearance of the sky.

-- If Honest Monk and Gong Jiu were set aside, the sky would have its original appearance back.

-- The Little Old Man was the sky.

Lu Xiaofeng recalled what the Little Old Man told him:

-- If Lu Xiaofeng agreed to join the Little Old Man in his business, he could take as long as he wanted to think it over, there would not be the least bit of restriction of his movement; he could do anything, he could go anywhere.

But this would not happen. Because Lu Xiaofeng practically did not wish to join.

This fact, the Little Old Man should know.

Therefore, letting him go, letting him and Sha Man go together, was nothing more than to let the romance between Sha Man and he to grow deeper, to grow more unforgettable. Therefore, the scheme to frame him up, was no more than to make it even more difficult, even more distressing, for Lu Xiaofeng to walk the Jianghu.

All these only had one goal. The Little Old Man's goal.

-- To join them.

If Lu Xiaofeng joined them, he knew that the robbery of the escorted goods would be clarified immediately. Not only that, Lu Xiaofeng would be the one solving the case, hence he would win back his innocence.

If this happened, his prestige would rise even higher, nobody would ever suspect that he could do bad deeds, then probably he would be an invisible man without precedence and never be duplicated in the future.

If Lu Xiaofeng joined their business, he knew that Sha Man would appear right away, and he would not suffer the pining of love anymore.

Yet Lu Xiaofeng still had lingering doubt.

-- Why did the Little Old Man insist on having Lu Xiaofeng in his organization?

-- They were already able to hijack thirty-five million taels worth of gold, pearls and jewels, what else did they want him to do?

There was only one possible answer to these questions:

-- The Little Old Man was going to carry out an unusually big plot. This plot would definitely be a plot that will shake the Jianghu.

-- Hence the Little Old Man needed him.

-- Hence with thousand ways, a hundred plans the Little Old Man laid out a trap to implicate him.

Lu Xiaofeng felt very sorry for the Little Old Man. Because the Little Old Man did not understand him.

Would he be willing to suffer unredressed injustice from the disdain of the Jianghu people by joining them doing shady business?

Would he abandon his life principle for the sake of avoiding heartache due to romantic love?

If he would, he was not Lu Xiaofeng.

If there was no Lu Xiaofeng, Jianghu would have been overcome by evil forces, perhaps from the 'black and white' ways, only one remained. The 'black' way.

Although it was possible for evil forces to establish their dominance for a period of time, a hero would always appear to rectify the situation, an

uncompromising hero, a hero who did not succumb to temptation, who was undeterred by confusion of emotions, who disregarded life or death, gratitude and grudges.

Lu Xiaofeng was definitely this kind of hero. Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng was grieved, the kind of grief from being misunderstood.

In Lu Xiaofeng's eyes, the Little Old Man was an eccentric man.

Lu Xiaofeng himself was also an eccentric man.

An eccentric man ought to understand other eccentric men. But the Little Old Man did not understand Lu Xiaofeng.

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng recalled something:

-- Perhaps the Little Old Man was a perfect man.

In Lu Xiaofeng's eyes, there were three things about the perfect man:

-- First, perfect man was not an ordinary man.

-- Second, perfect man was not 'fun'. [Play on words: perfect man - 完人 (wan ren), fun - 好玩 (hao wan).]

-- Third, perfect man is 'finished'. [The 完 of 完人 means 'finish/over/complete'.]

The Little Old Man's intellect, the number of talents he accumulated on the island, his scheming ability on the heist, all of these are not the things that an ordinary man can accomplish.

In talking with the Little Old Man, it was clear that he only had one focus: to get you to join his line of business. Take Lu Xiaofeng for example, with thousand ways, a hundred plans, the Little Old Man wanted to force Lu Xiaofeng to join him. This matter was definitely not 'fun'.

Dealing with such people, Lu Xiaofeng had only one way. A rather complicated, but very effective way:

-- Do not compromise, do not get trapped by emotion, brave the Little Old Man and Gong Jiu to the very end, investigate the robberies and murders, do not rest until this matter is cleared, do not give up.

When Lu Xiaofeng decided on doing something, he usually was able to accomplish it. Therefore, the Little Old Man could be considered 'finished'.

After making up his mind, Lu Xiaofeng knew that he had to do two things.

-- He must go back to that wooden cabin over the cliff to see if Honest Monk left some clues for him to find.

Honest Monk could not possibly just kidnap Sha Man and disappeared, he must have figured out a way to let Lu Xiaofeng know what he was

doing, and where to go to find him and Sha Man.

If he returned to the wooden cabin and ended up empty-handed, then he had to do the other thing:

-- Go to Chang'an.

Lu Xiaofeng had led Ying Yan Laoqi to Chang'an. Ying Yan Laoqi would definitely go to Chang'an to find Ximen Chuixue's whereabouts.

Therefore, as long as Lu Xiaofeng went to Chang'an, he would be able to find Ying Yan Laoqi.

And if he found Ying Yan Laoqi, he would find Gong Jiu, and most probably he would find Honest Monk and Sha Man as well.

But before he could do these two things, he must do one other thing first.

If he did not do this one thing, he could forget about doing other things later.

This thing was:

-- He had to say goodbye to Ximen Chuixue.

[1] Su Dongpo, also known as Su Shi (1037-1101), northern Song writer and calligrapher.

Chapter 21 – The Search

Just like the last time, there was the sound of melodious flute.

Just like the last time, he sat opposite of Ximen Chuixue.

Just like the last time, he sat on the same seat, with the dark green Zhuyeqing [green bamboo leaf] wine in his cup.

The difference was: this time Lu Xiaofeng was not arriving, he was leaving.

The wine was still in the cup, the heroic spirit was still there.

Lu Xiaofeng could still feel it in his heart, a heroic passion, not the sadness of separation.

But Ximen Chuixue felt the sadness of separation, "You are not waiting for Xiao Yu to get well and then leave together?"

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head, "She can recuperate here with you, this is the safest place for her."

"Are you handing this hot sweet potato over to me?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"You are wrong," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Oh?" Ximen Chuixue said.

"She is not sweet potato," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Even more, she is not sweet potato that will scald your hand."

"Then what is she?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"A beauty," Lu Xiaofeng answered, "An injured beauty. Such an opportunity to get close to a beauty like this, if it were not for an emergency, I am not going to hand it over to you."

Ximen Chuixue said, "I only need to holler, and then a bunch of living, hopping beauties will be by my side. Why would I want to take this opportunity?"

"Because you are Ximen Chuixue," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I don't get it," Ximen Chuixue said.

"Do you know what other people call you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"What do they call me?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"They said," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Ximen Chuixue is not blowing snow, but blood." [See Chapter 18 on 'xue' (snow) vs 'xue' (blood).]

"Does it have anything to do with Xiao Yu?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"Of course it does," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "It is highly related!"

"Oh?" Ximen Chuixue said.

"The injury Xiao Yu suffers, her blood is flowing," Lu Xiaofeng explained, "Only you, this 'blowing blood' Ximen 'blowing snow' can blow the blood of her injury away, and turn her into a living, hopping beauty."

"You want me to take care of her until when?" Ximen Chuixue said.

"Until she can get up by herself and walk away," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Or ..."

"Or what?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"Or until she wants to leave," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Or ..."

"There's something else?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"Of course there is," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Or what else?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"Or," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Until you want her to leave."

"Do I have a reason not to want her to leave?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"It's hard to say," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Because she is a very easy-going and witty beauty."

Ximen Chuixue said, "You want me to take care of her, I will definitely take a good care of her; but, who do you think Ximen Chuixue is?"

"A man who can take a joke," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Why do you want to joke with me?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"Because you have a parting sorrow in your heart," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Oh?" Ximen Chuixue said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "I am joking with you, it's nothing more than to dilute the parting sorrow in your heart."

"What about you?" Ximen Chuixue said, "Don't you have the least bit of parting sorrow?"

"I don't," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"You are a person without feeling," Ximen Chuixue said.

"I have a feeling," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"What kind of feeling?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

"Heroic feeling," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"I don't understand you," Ximen Chuixue said.

"You want to understand me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Yes," Ximen Chuixue replied.

Lu Xiaofeng raised the wine cup in his hand and said, "Let's drink it up first."

After Ximen Chuixue downed his cup, he saw Lu Xiaofeng standing up. "You want to leave?" he asked.

"Yes," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Then how am I going to understand you?" Ximen Chuixue asked.

Lu Xiaofeng picked up the chopsticks and bowl from the table and used the chopstick to tap the bowl, while he sang loudly,

"Vowing to go, to enter the mountain of sabers!

Strong noble spirit, going through hundreds of thousands!

Heroic feeling unbounded, haughtiness of men, coming and going alone, returning to the underworld!

Deliberately charge into tiger and leopard den; going today, wonder when one can return?

Dealing with the problem of thousand days of the delight of wine, how unbearable it is that as we sit face to face right now it is already late.

How I wish that together with you, we can finish another cup!

Meeting and separating, cherish it in the heart!

Do not forget our friendship, the eternal heroic spirit, someday we'll meet again, it won't be too late."

The song ended, the wine cup was empty. Lu Xiaofeng put down the bowl and the chopsticks, he turned around and left.

"Hold on!" Ximen Chuixue bellowed while standing up, he strode over, and turned around to face Lu Xiaofeng.

Ximen Chuixue did not say anything, he merely extended both hands. His hands grabbed Lu Xiaofeng's wrists. Lu Xiaofeng's hands also grabbed Ximen Chuixue's wrists.

Moved by emotion, Ximen Chuixue softly recited, "Do not forget our friendship, the eternal heroic spirit, someday we'll meet again, it won't be too late."

Ximen Chuixue's eyes were moist. Lu Xiaofeng released Ximen Chuixue's wrists and strode out.

He heard Lu Xiaofeng's bold and unconstrained singing, as if it lingered freely in the night, "Do not forget our friendship, the eternal heroic spirit, someday we'll meet again, it won't be too late."

Wind. Sea breeze.

The sea breeze caressed Lu Xiaofeng's body. Lu Xiaofeng was standing on the overhanging cliff.

The waves lapped the shore. The sound of the waves rising and falling rhythmically entered Lu Xiaofeng's ears. It reminded him of some kind of sound. The breathing sound.

-- Sha Man's gentle and even breathing when she was sleeping soundly.

He suddenly understood one thing.

He understood why lovers love to go to the seaside, gazing at the boundless sea, recalling the fond memories of the past; turned out the sound waves gently careening the rocks and the sandy shore was similar to the voice of the lover whispering on the ears.

The memories conjured at the beach are oftentimes the most unforgettable memories, as well as the sweetest memories. Lu Xiaofeng made a decision.

-- When he settled down, he wanted to settle down with Sha Man by the seaside.

But where was Sha Man?

-- Sha Man, Sha Man, where could you be?

Lantern.

The lantern was lighted. The lantern was in Lu Xiaofeng's hand. The lantern light was moving, because Lu Xiaofeng's feet were moving.

Nothing, not a single thing.

Assisted by the lantern, Lu Xiaofeng has already searched every nook and corner of the house, yet he did not find the least bit of clue.

-- Did Honest Monk really not leave any clue at all?

Lu Xiaofeng thought it was inconceivable.

With thousand ways, a hundred plans they were trying to force Lu

Xiaofeng to give in; abducting Sha Man was undoubtedly to threaten Lu Xiaofeng.

The time has come for everybody to finally lay his cards on the table; but without being able to see your opponent, how can you lay your cards on the table?

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng was convinced that Honest Monk must have left a clue somewhere for him to find, so that he could lay his cards on the table.

Yet, Lu Xiaofeng did not find anything. When he set down the lantern, he suddenly felt a chill in the air.

-- Could it be that Honest Monk abducting Sha Man has nothing to do with the Little Old Man?

-- Could it be that Honest Monk abducting Sha Man because he wanted to do something 'dishonest' to her?

Lu Xiaofeng's fear very soon disappeared; not because he believed Honest Monk was not a lecher, but because he found one thing.

Actually, what he found was not one thing, rather, it was two characters.

-- Gong Jiu.

These two characters were not written with ink, but it was carved onto

the wooden table by finger strength.

Lu Xiaofeng was preoccupied with picking up the lantern and looked everywhere, but neglected to look the table underneath the lantern. Turned out these two characters were carved right there.

Although he had already guessed that this matter was related to Gong Jiu, seeing Honest Monk carved these two characters with his finger, Lu Xiaofeng felt relieved instead. Because all along there was this dark shadow in his heart, he was very afraid that Sha Man's disappearance had nothing to do with Gong Jiu.

Now all doubts were gone. The only one he had to deal with, was Gong Jiu. If he wanted to find Gong Jiu, he must find Ying Yan Laoqi. To find Ying Yan Laoqi, he must go to Chang'an.

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng rode his mount under the moonlight on the road to Chang'an.

Wine. The wine in the bowl.

The bowl, with the wine in it, was in Ying Yan Laoqi's hand. It was his twenty-fourth bowl of wine tonight.

Just like the first twenty three bowls of wine, in one gulp he downed the wine into his belly.

By the time he downed the twenty-sixth bowl, Ying Yan Laoqi thought that he was drunk.

Because he suddenly discovered that on the table right where the bowl was, a saber suddenly appeared. He rubbed his eyes vigorously.

"No need to rub your eyes, you are not drunk," a voice came from behind him.

Ying Yan Laoqi looked back, but he did not see anybody.

Turning his gaze back to the saber, Ying Yan Laoqi said, "How do you know I am not drunk?"

"Because the saber you are looking at is a real, solid saber, and not a figment of your imagination." The voice was still coming from behind him.

Before the voice finished speaking, Ying Yan Laoqi turned his head abruptly, but still he did not see anything, and the voice finished the sentence, still sounded as if it came from behind him.

Ying Yan Laoqi suddenly turned around, picked the saber from the table and asked, "Is this my own saber?"

"It was yours," the voice replied.

"And now?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

"It is still yours."

"Why did you take it away for several days?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

"Because I wanted to steal the saber to establish my prestige."

"Why do you have to do that?"

"So that you'd go to Chang'an."

"You understand me very well. Who are you?"

"I don't understand you, I am Lu Xiaofeng." By the time he finished speaking, Lu Xiaofeng has already sat in front of Ying Yan Laoqi.

"Why did you make me to go to Chang'an?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

"Because I want to pass my days in comfort," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Does this matter have anything to do with how you pass your days?" Ying Yan Laoqi said.

"It does," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "Because when you were looking for Ximen Chuixue, the one staying at his house happens to be me. If I did not lead you away, you would come back and bother me for half a day for nothing; would I be able to pass my day in peace?"

"Why did you stay at Ximen Chuixue's house?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

"Because I was waiting for him to come back," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Where did he go?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

"Pick up Sha Man," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"And where is Sha Man?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

"He could not find her," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"He could not find her?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

"That's why I came to Chang'an," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Is Sha Man in Chang'an?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

"I don't know," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Why are you in Chang'an then?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

"Looking for you," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Looking for me?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked, "Looking for me for what? I don't know where Sha Man is either."

"You do," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I do?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked, "Even I don't know that I know, yet you know that I know?"

"I just know that you know," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Ying Yan Laoqi was bewildered.

"I also know that actually you do not know where Sha Man is," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Ying Yan Laoqi was even more baffled.

"But," Lu Xiaofeng continued, "I do know that you know where someone else is."

Ying Yan Laoqi's eyes lit up. "And this person knows where Sha Man is?" he asked.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. Too bad he was two 'eyebrows' short. "Didn't I tell you that you were not drunk at all?" he said.

"Who is this person?" Ying Yan Laoqi asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said word by word, "Gong Jiu."

When Ying Yan Laoqi finished his sixteenth bowl of wine, he was the only person remaining in the main hall of the inn.

When Lu Xiaofeng saw him, he was drinking his twenty-fourth bowl. At that time, there was no one else in the hall but the two of them.

Now, there was no one else either, but suddenly there was some kind of noise.

The noise of a lot of secret projectiles splitting the air.

Although Lu Xiaofeng's reaction was very quick, he was still a tiny bit too slow. Actually, he was not slow, Ying Yan Laoqi was.

Because although Ying Yan Laoqi was not drunk, but after drinking twenty six bowls of hot and spicy Shaodaozi wine, his reaction slowed down considerably.

Therefore, when Lu Xiaofeng pulled Ying Yan Laoqi's hand and he tried to jump up, he was already too slow.

Naturally Lu Xiaofeng was not injured, the one injured was Ying Yan Laoqi. Because the target of the secret projectiles was not Lu Xiaofeng, but all of them were shot at Ying Yan Laoqi.

The one they wanted to kill was precisely Ying Yan Laoqi.

Lu Xiaofeng did not break through the roof or dash to the street; he was

not chasing after the people who released the secret projectiles at all. He had two reasons for not doing just that.

-- After those people released the secret projectiles, they would definitely flee separately; they definitely would not wait to see if the target of their secret projectiles died or not. Because they knew who they were dealing with. If they waited to see, there would be only one way they could take to escape: death.

-- The one they wanted to kill was not Lu Xiaofeng, but Ying Yan Laoqi. It was clear that they had been trailing Ying Yan Laoqi all along. The reason they wanted to kill him was nothing more than to shut his mouth. Therefore, the most urgent business Lu Xiaofeng was facing currently was to have Ying Yan Laoqi spill out Gong Jiu's secret.

But Lu Xiaofeng did not hear Ying Yan Laoqi spilling out Gong Jiu's secret at all; rather, he was listening to Ying Yan Laoqi's confession.

Although he knew that the secret projectile hitting Ying Yan Laoqi was highly poisonous, and that he would not live for long, he did not interrupt Ying Yan Laoqi stammering his confession.

The confession made at the death's door was a way to obtain the last few moments of peace; how could Lu Xiaofeng interrupt him?

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng only listened calmly, attentively.

The pain on Ying Yan Laoqi's face gradually turned into a peaceful expression. He looked at Lu Xiaofeng and said, "Will you forgive me?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded. His eyes were brimming with tears.

The Zongpiaobazi of the Twelve-Dock Alliance, the Ying Yan Laoqi, whose fame shook the whole world, whose reputation nobody else could even dream of achieving, unexpectedly just to get some more money he ended up like this? Not only that, those additional wealth was not in the least useful to Ying Yan Laoqi anyway. Because the wealth he had already amassed, he could not even spend it all in his lifetime.

Seeing Lu Xiaofeng nodded his head, Ying Yan Laoqi knew that he was forgiven. A smile appeared on his face as he feebly said, "I ... I ... have a ... a secret ... I ... want ... to ... tell ... you."

Lu Xiaofeng did not say anything. He immediately put his ear to Ying Yan Laoqi's mouth.

Lu Xiaofeng heard three words. Ying Yan Laoqi's last three words, "Gong Jiu Tai ..." [Tai means 'highest/greatest/too (much)/very/extremely.]

-- Gong Jiu too ...?

-- Gong Jiu too what?

Lu Xiaofeng stood in front of a pile of yellow dirt [i.e. new grave], thinking hard about the unfinished secret that Ying Yan Laoqi was trying to tell him just before he died.

-- Gong Jiu has gone too far?

-- Gong Jiu is too aggressive?

-- Gong Jiu has too much power?

-- Gong Jiu is too formidable? [Translator's note: in Chinese, all these sentences have the word 'too' right after the words Gong Jiu.]

-- Did he say 'too' [太], or 'grand' [泰, as in 'Mount Tai' (Taishan)]?

-- Gong Jiu on Mount Tai?

-- Gong Jiu's secret is on Mount Tai?

-- Gong Jiu's base of operation is on Mount Tai?

-- Gong Jiu hid all those stolen treasures on Mount Tai?

Lu Xiaofeng gave up.

To Ying Yan Laoqi, he died in peace. It could even be said that he died a timely death. But to Lu Xiaofeng, Ying Yan Laoqi failed to reveal Gong Jiu's secret. His death seemed to be a bit not worth it.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly sighed with a realization:

-- With death, all one's troubles are solved. Those who remain could not even make head or tail of the Jianghu's gratitude and grudges, love and hate!

-- In Jianghu, there is no such thing as 'freedom to act independently'!

Lu Xiaofeng thought back to his desire to retire.

Thinking about retirement, he thought about he wanted to have somebody by his side.

Thinking about the person he wanted to have by his side, he thought about Sha Man.

Thinking about Sha Man, suddenly his heartbeat accelerated.

-- Where was Sha Man?

-- Where was Honest Monk?

-- Where was Gong Jiu?

-- Where could he find any trace of Sha Man?

-- If only he knew where to look, he would be able to find traces of Sha Man.

Problem is: he did not know.

He only knew one thing: he had to find her, he must look for her.

Since they had disappeared without a trace, there was only one way: he had to reveal his own whereabouts, and let Gong Jiu come looking for him.

Therefore, he decided to do one thing.

-- Go to Chang'an's downtown.

Downtown. Bustling downtown. Downtown at dusk.

People come and people go, horses come and carriages go. Lu Xiaofeng mingled into the crowd.

Restaurant. Chang'an's restaurant.

Lu Xiaofeng walked past thirty-eight restaurants before he selected one. It was Chang'an's biggest restaurant, the cleanest, and the most crowded.

The most important fact he found was that this Chang'an's restaurant was already full.

Stepping into the door of the restaurant, even all the waiters were too busy to greet him. He was very happy instead, because it was exactly what he was hoping for.

He swept the hall with his gaze, and saw a square table with three men sitting around it. Three big men with thick eyebrows, rough eyes, and rugged muscles.

Lu Xiaofeng decided to make these three men his target.

Lu Xiaofeng stood in front of these three men's table, just by the fourth, empty side.

Lu Xiaofeng waited until the three men looked up at him. "May I sit here?" he asked.

"You may not," one of the three men replied.

Lu Xiaofeng pulled a chair and sat down.

The three men's six eyes stared at him in disbelief.

"I said you may not. Are you deaf?"

Lu Xiaofeng looked at the speaker and laughed. "I am not deaf," he said.

"Then why haven't you get lost?" the man's voice was growing louder.

"I cannot get lost, because although I am not deaf, but I am a human."

"Who are you?"

"I am Lu Xiaofeng."

The three men stared blankly at him. And then all three of them looked up and roared in laughter.

One of them even reached out to stroke the place above Lu Xiaofeng's lip where the mustache has been shaved. "You are Lu Xiaofeng?" he asked.

"I am Lu Xiaofeng," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"In that case," the man said, "Do you know who I am?"

"Who are you?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I am also surnamed Lu," the man replied.

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

The man said, "I am Lu Dalong." [Translator's note: 'xiaofeng' – little phoenix, 'dalong' – big dragon.]

Lu Xiaofeng clapped. "Good," he said, "Good name."

With bewildered eyes the man looked at Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng picked the wine cup in front of the man who professed to be Lu Dalong, and said, "Come, I toast you one cup."

'Lu Dalong' was dumstruck.

Lu Xiaofeng downed the wine in one gulp and said, "You are called 'big dragon' and I am called 'little phoenix'; we happened to be a pair[1]."

'Lu Dalong' slapped the table and bellowed, "Precisely, like an old man and his son, Dalong and Xiaofeng; I thought you didn't get it."

"How could I not get it?" Lu Xiaofeng said, "It's just that there is a little detail that I don't quite get it."

"What is it?" the man asked.

"Who is the old man, and who is the son?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

The three men roared in laughter, as if it was the funniest joke they ever heard in their lives. They laughed throwing their heads back or doubling over, attracting the attention of everybody else in the entire hall, even the food and drink on their table was shaken.

Amidst the laughter, one of the big man pointed to Lu Xiaofeng and asked, "You really don't know?"

With a solemn expression Lu Xiaofeng replied, "I really don't know."

The big man who asked suddenly stopped laughing. The other two men no longer laughed either, in an instant their laughing expression became awkward smile; a very ugly awkward smile.

Because they saw Lu Xiaofeng ran his hand gently on the edge of the table, and the wood immediately turned into sawdust, which then rained gently to the floor.

They could not laugh anymore. There was only one thought popping out in their mind:

-- This person may actually be Lu Xiaofeng.

Therefore, all of them immediately assumed contrite manners, a very anxious manner; their big eyes turned into small eyes as they looked at Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng chuckled.

Lu Xiaofeng said with a laugh, "You haven't answered my question."

With a choking voice, as if he was ready to cry, 'Lu Dalong' asked, "Which question?"

"Who is the old man, and who is the son?" Lu Xiaofeng repeated.

'Lu Dalong' suddenly raised his hand and slapped his own face, saying, "You are the old man, I am your turtle son [i.e. b@stard/s.o.b.]."

'Slap, slap!' finished speaking he slapped his face again.

But Lu Xiaofeng shook his head and said, "Wrong answer."

'Lu Dalong' expression turned even more awkward, it looked like he was about to cry for real. "Wrong answer?" he said, "Are you saying you want to be my turtle son?"

'Slap, slap!' this time the big man standing next to 'Lu Dalong' gave him a couple of slaps on his face.

"Please forgive us, Master Lu," the big man said, "He is stupid, he doesn't know how to talk. Daren[2] please be magnanimous and let us go."

"I haven't said anything about what I am going to do with you," Lu Xiaofeng said, "It was you who made things difficult for me. Tell me then, who is the old man, and who is the son?"

The three men immediately dropped on their knees together and kowtowed, "You are the old man, we are your turtle sons."

"How could you make the same mistake again?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

The three men stared blankly at Lu Xiaofeng.

"Can the phoenix in the sky give birth to turtles?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

Speaking in unison, the three men replied, "No."

"Then where did the turtle sons come from?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

'Slap, slap!' there were six ringing slaps, because each man smacked his own face twice.

And thus the three characters 'Lu Xiao Feng' spread out loud and clear around the Chang'an's downtown area.

Lu Xiaofeng knew that before long, the people of Jianghu would find out that Lu Xiaofeng was in Chang'an.

This, of course, included Gong Jiu and Honest Monk. If Gong Jiu wanted to find Lu Xiaofeng, he would go to Chang'an.

Time. It was a peculiar thing. To a hardworking man, time always flies like an arrow, he can never find enough of it. To a lazy man, time always walks slowly like a snail, it is always too much. Happy man always wishes the time would stop, lonely man always wishes it would pass quickly.

In the same period of time, people are born, people die, some are happy, some are anxious.

Thinking about 'time', Lu Xiaofeng had a single thought.

-- Right this moment, what was Sha Man thinking?

Sha Man was thinking about Lu Xiaofeng, no doubt about it.

Ever since Lu Xiaofeng left that day, she had begun to miss Lu Xiaofeng. Being brought by Honest Monk to this place, she missed Lu Xiaofeng even more.

Every day, she was hoping for a miracle: that Lu Xiaofeng would suddenly appear in front of her.

Quite several time she almost succumbed to the impulse of going out to look for Lu Xiaofeng; but she knew that she simply must not do that.

Her life in this place has been very good, a maid took care of her every day need, not only that, she had total freedom to roam around the garden. She knew that Honest Monk was not afraid that she would escape. She had lived on the island for too long, she has forgotten everything on the mainland; even if she escaped from this government-official residence-type building, where could she go? She had recognized this fact early on; therefore, she felt at-ease in living in this place, waiting patiently, waiting for destiny to arrange what her next step would be.

She did not want to think about anything, her thought was focused on

Lu Xiaofeng. She fondly recalled the time she spent with Lu Xiaofeng, she thought about the happiness of being with Lu Xiaofeng later. And that was how she passed her days.

Every day Honest Monk would visit Sha Man once. Every time both of them were silent without saying anything.

Except today.

Honest Monk came in with a smile on his face. As soon as he saw Sha Man, he exclaimed, "Good news."

Sha Man maintained her languid appearance. "What good news?" she asked.

"The good news that you are dying to hear," Honest Monk replied.

-- Lu Xiaofeng!

Very quickly she suppressed the delight in her heart; with the most indifferent tone she could muster she said, "You guys have news about Lu Xiaofeng?"

"He is in Chang'an," Honest Monk said.

"Chang'an?" Sha Man asked, "Is Chang'an far from here?"

"Three days journey," Honest Monk replied.

Sha Man did not say anything.

"I beg you not to entertain that idea," Honest Monk said.

"What idea are you talking about," Sha Man shockingly asked.

Honest Monk said, "You want to get out of here and go to look for Lu Xiaofeng."

"You are really the worm in my belly," Sha Man said.

"Amitufo," Honest Monk said, "Monk has a bit of perception, that's all."

Honest Monk looked at Sha Man, and then he continued, "I advise you not to plan on running away. This is for your own good."

Sha Man was puzzled. "Why is it for my own good?" she asked.

Honest Monk replied, "Because if you leave, if you go to Chang'an, you might not see Lu Xiaofeng."

"Why?" Sha Man asked, "Didn't you say he is in Chang'an?"

"That was three days ago," Honest Monk replied.

"And now?" Sha Man asked.

"And now he might be here," Honest Monk replied.

"Here?" Sha Man asked.

"What I mean by 'here' is around here somewhere, not 'here' in this place," Honest Monk replied.

"Why?" Sha Man asked.

"Because we don't want him to see you yet," Honest Monk replied.

"When are you going to let me see him?" Sha Man asked.

"There is only one answer to your question, and the answer only has three words," Honest Monk said.

"Which three words?" Sha Man asked.

"When the time comes," Honest Monk replied [Oh, I know it's four words, but I am too lazy to make things up, so I simply translate it as it is; the original was '到时候'.]

Probably the so-called 'When the time comes' can also mean 'forever'.

Because, if Lu Xiaofeng refused to agree to Gong Jiu and the other's demand, by the time Lu Xiaofeng could see Sha Man, probably what he saw would be a dead Sha Man.

Therefore, when Honest Monk sent people to pick Lu Xiaofeng up and brought him to stay in this luxury residence, when he asked Honest Monk when he could see Sha Man, and Honest Monk responded with 'When the time comes', Lu Xiaofeng knew that he had to rely on himself.

He knew Gong Jiu's intention in picking him up was merely to tell him that Sha Man was nearby, but Lu Xiaofeng could not see her. Knowing that Sha Man was nearby but he could not see her, Lu Xiaofeng might be more impatient, Lu Xiaofeng might be more anxious, and then perhaps he would be easier to persuade.

Lu Xiaofeng understood this logic. He also knew that the longer he stayed in this place, the more difficult he would be to manipulate.

Therefore, as soon as he entered the place where Honest Monk had arranged for him to stay, he was not bashful to eat and drink as much as he liked, and then he covered his head and took a nap.

Human's willpower is really fantastic; when he willed himself to wake up at certain time, he did indeed sleep up that time and then woke up.

By the time Lu Xiaofeng woke up, it was midnight. It was precisely the time he wanted to start his operation.

There was no moon, but the stars filled the sky. Sucking a breath of cold

air, Lu Xiaofeng felt his entire body was invigorated.

Standing on the roof, borrowing the light from the stars, Lu Xiaofeng took a quick glance of his surrounding. The buildings were spread out neatly. He found out that the building where he stayed was the smallest building in this complex.

He knew that Sha Man did not stay in this complex. Because based on Gong Jiu's loftiness, he would not stay in such a small building; he must have stayed in a large mansion.

Lu Xiaofeng only needed to find the largest building, and then most probably he would find Sha Man too.

Lu Xiaofeng had already thought about all these things when Honest Monk told him 'when the time comes'. He could not possibly just sit and wait, he must go out and look. He believed he would be able to find Sha Man, he had that kind of confidence.

Lu Xiaofeng did not miscalculate. Unfortunately, Gong Jiu was able to calculate even faster than he did.

Therefore, when he found the big mansion, the place where Sha Man originally stayed, Sha Man had already gone.

But Honest Monk was there.

Honest Monk was wearing an expression that said that he already knew Lu Xiaofeng would come. "You are very smart," he said.

"Too bad someone is even smarter," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"That person is not smarter than you are at all," Honest Monk said.

"Oh?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"That person merely received report that you are not in bed, hence he hurriedly took Sha Man away and left me here," Honest Monk said.

"Leave you here?" Lu Xiaofeng shouted, "Why would he leave you here? I was not looking for you."

"Amitufo," Honest Monk said with a laugh, "Appearance is empty. Sha Man is Honest Monk. You found me, it's the same as you found Sha Man."

Lu Xiaofeng really wanted to laugh, but he simply could not laugh.

Therefore, he had no choice but stepping forward, stepping toward Honest Monk, and spread his arms wide.

"What are you doing?" Honest Monk asked.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "Didn't you say that finding you is just the same as finding Sha Man?"

"That's right," Honest Monk said.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "When I found Sha Man, the first thing I want to do is to embrace her. Therefore, I want to embrace you."

Honest Monk stepped back while waving his hands. "That's a big no-no," he said.

"Why not?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because Monk is also a man," Honest Monk said, "Man cannot embrace another man."

"Didn't you say you are Sha Man?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"That is a very mysterious matter," Honest Monk said, "Let's talk about something else."

"Something else?" Lu Xiaofeng said, "What other matter?"

With a very serious face Honest Monk said, "A very big matter."

"Big matter?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "What big matter?"

"The matter concerning the life and death of two people," Honest Monk replied.

"The life and death of two people?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Is one of those

two happen to be me?"

"You see," Honest Monk said, "Didn't I say you are very smart?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "And the other person is Sha Man?"

"Ay," Honest Monk sighed, "You are such a smart man, how come you can't figure it out at all?"

"I can't figure it out?" Lu Xiaofeng said, "What is it that I can't figure out?"

Honest Monk said, "Concerning the Little Old Man's proposal, why are you so persistent? What's holding you up?"

Lu Xiaofeng stared at Honest Monk for a moment. He shook his head and said, "Although all along I did not understand you, but all along I always thought that you are a man of principle; what made you change? What made you agree to the Little Old Man to be his subordinate, to be an invisible man?"

"Because I got over it," Honest Monk said.

"Get over it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Get over what?"

"Life," Honest Monk replied.

"Life?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Do you understand life?"

"I do," Honest Monk replied.

"What do you think life is?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Life is to seek pleasure," Honest Monk replied, "I, Honest Monk, painstakingly cultivate penance for a lifetime, in the end, what do I achieve? Life quickly passes several dozen winters and summers, why should I mistreat myself? The Little Old Man is right, seize the day, don't wait till the young head turns white, because at that time regret will be too late."

Lu Xiaofeng stared at Honest Monk again. With a bitter laugh he said, "Is that your understanding of life? In order to seek pleasure you entered the Little Old Man's line of business?"

"Am I wrong?" Honest Monk asked.

"You are wrong," Lu Xiaofeng replied, "You know what else is there to life?"

"What else?" Honest Monk asked.

Lu Xiaofeng spoke word-by-word, "Morality, compassion, conscience."

Honest Monk laughed. He said, "You are holding on to those things? Are those the reason you are not open-minded?"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled and said, "It's exactly because I am open-minded that I hold on to those things. Don't you understand?"

Honest Monk shook his head, "I don't," he said.

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "Actually, it doesn't matter whether you understand or not. What matters is: you and I have different views of life."

Honest Monk said, "This means that there must be a conflict between us, and this is the reason we have to fight each other."

"Then you are doomed to be the loser," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Why?" Honest Monk asked.

"Because evil will never prevail over righteousness," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Honest Monk laughed. He said, "Don't forget there is another saying."

"What saying?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk said, "Virtue is one chi [approx. 1 foot], devil is one zhang [approx. 10 feet; *i.e.* it takes constant vigilance to stave off evil.]

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed. He said, "You do know that devil and virtue

are not the same, don't you?"

"Of course the two are not the same," Honest Monk replied.

"Therefore," Lu Xiaofeng said, "The scales of virtue and devil are not the same either. Virtue's one chi might be equal to ten zhang, while devil's one zhang might be only one cun [approx. 1 inch]."

Honest Monk was speechless.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, "Actually, I still don't understand one thing."

Honest Monk looked at Lu Xiaofeng with questioning eyes.

Lu Xiaofeng said, "The Little Old Man already has martial art masters such as Gong Jiu and yourself, why must he insist on having me as well?"

"Because you are the most useful," Honest Monk said.

Lu Xiaofeng was puzzled. "Me?" he said, "I am the most useful? I am afraid Gong Jiu's martial art skill is higher than mine; can I be more useful than him?"

"Absolutely," Honest Monk replied confidently.

This time Lu Xiaofeng was speechless.

Honest Monk said, "Because the thing that the Little Old Man wants to accomplish, only you can do it."

"Other people cannot do it? You cannot do it? Gong Jiu cannot do it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk replied word-by-word, "Only you can do it."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk said, "Because in that situation, only you can be really, really invisible. In that situation, only you can make other people let down their vigilance."

"What kind of situation is that?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Honest Monk did not answer.

"You can't tell me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"I can," Honest Monk replied.

"Then why don't you tell me?" Lu Xiaofeng said.

"I can tell you," Honest Monk said, "But not here."

"Where then?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Must be where Gong Jiu is," Honest Monk replied.

"Why must it be where Gong Jiu is before you can tell me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Because this is a big secret that will shake the world," Honest Monk said, "After I tell you, you will only have two paths to take."

"Which two paths?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"One is the path of life, which is you agree to become an invisible man," Honest Monk said.

"And the other is the path of death?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Correct, it's the path of death" Honest Monk replied, "Because you cannot be let alive after you know the big secret; therefore, Gong Jiu must be present before I can tell you."

"Because Gong Jiu can kill me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"You are right again," Honest Monk said.

"All right," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Let's go!"

"Go?" Honest Monk asked, "Go where?"

"Go to Gong Jiu," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"Go to Gong Jiu?" Honest Monk asked, "Go right now?"

"Yes," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Because I want to know this earth-shattering secret right away."

"You do realize that after you know the secret you only have two paths to take, don't you?" Honest Monk asked.

"I do," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Which path are you going to take?" Honest Monk asked, "The path to death? The path of life?"

"Do you want to die?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Of course not!" Honest Monk replied, "Who would want to die?"

"That's right!" Lu Xiaofeng said, "You think I want to die?"

"Are you saying," Honest Monk said excitedly, "That you agree to be an invisible man?"

"If I do not become an invisible man I cannot live?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

'Chopping the nail and slicing the iron' [i.e. resolutely and decisively]
Honest Monk said, "You can't."

With the same resolution and decision Lu Xiaofeng said, "I will show you that I can."

[1] In Chinese mythology and culture, dragon and phoenix are complements to each other, *e.g.* Emperor (dragon) and Empress (phoenix), yang and yin, groom and bride, *etc.*

[2] Daren - lit. 'big person', a term of respect to address superior or government officers.

Chapter 22 – The Invisible Man

A gigantic door. An open giant door. The number of persons entering the giant door was only one.

Standing outside the door, Honest Monk said to Lu Xiaofeng, “You go in. In the front courtyard there are three rooms, inside these three rooms there are three different persons, they all are waiting for you.”

“Three persons?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“I can tell you the names of the two persons,” Honest Monk said, “One is Gong Jiu, the other is the one you are yearning for day and night, Sha Man.”

“Why can’t you tell me who the other one is?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“No reason,” Honest Monk replied, “It’s just that you may never see this person again.”

“Oh?” Lu Xiaofeng said.

Honest Monk said, “It depends on your good luck. If the one inside the first room you are entering happens to be Sha Man, you may have a crazy, hot love before your death. If you meet Gong Jiu first, that’s too bad, you may tell the world these two words.”

“Which two words?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Goodbye [再见],” Honest Monk replied.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. “And if I enter the room of the person you cannot tell me?” he asked.

“Maybe you’ll fall dead without knowing rhyme or reason, maybe you’ll be very happy,” Honest Monk said.

Lu Xiaofeng’s interest was piqued, “I can be happy?” he asked.

“If you do not fall dead without knowing rhyme or reason, I guarantee that you will be very happy,” Honest Monk replied.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly remembered something; he asked, “Can I give a shout outside each door?”

“You can’t,” Honest Monk replied.

“Why?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Because if you call, you’d find a very amusing thing,” Honest Monk replied.

“How much amusing?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“You will find a lot of people sending you things,” Honest Monk replied.

“What things?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Secret projectiles,” Honest Monk replied, “Deadly secret projectiles. I guarantee that those secret projectiles will definitely take your life.”

“And after I enter the room?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“You may speak, you may laugh, you may do anything,” Honest Monk replied.

“In that case, may I say two words to you now?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“You may,” Honest Monk replied.

“Goodbye,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

Although the stars were still hanging in the sky, the spacious courtyard was completely dark.

Apart from the dim silhouettes of the rooms, the shrubbery and the garden rocks, Lu Xiaofeng could not see anything. He only knew something.

-- The three rooms were not connected to each other. There was one on his left, one on his right, and one in the middle.

He had to choose one. He went straight ahead.

His steps were very light, he was confident that the person inside has not

detected his presence. He was already standing in front of the door.

He did not immediately push the door open. He stood outside the door for approximately the time needed to burn a quarter of incense stick, but all along he did not hear the least bit of noise from the inside.

A thought arose in his heart.

-- The person inside could not be Sha Man. Because if it was Sha Man, she would let out some noise even in her sleep.

He was about to leave this room and select another one when another thought arose.

-- What if Sha Man was sleeping soundly?

Therefore, he stood for another quarter of incense stick.

Quiet. A death-like stillness. No sound of rustling wind, no pitter-patter of a mouse's feet across the floor, no sound of people talking in their sleep, not even the sound of someone turning on his bed.

Lu Xiaofeng decided to push open the door.

The door was opened with just one push. Quick and stealthy like a fox he rushed in. As soon as he stopped to get his bearings, he found something:

-- The door automatically closed behind him.

Therefore, he could not see anything. But he felt that someone was inside the room.

-- A man.

And then he felt sharp wind of a palm, as sharp as blade, went straight toward his heart.

‘Screech, screech!’ Lu Xiaofeng’s body instantly slid backwards, away from the wind.

But before Lu Xiaofeng steadied himself, the palm wind struck toward his heart again. He could not evade further.

Lu Xiaofeng did not fall dead without knowing rhyme or reason. The one who saved him was not other people, it was he, himself. Not his martial art skill, but his quick thinking.

The blade-like palm wind stopped not even two *cun* in front of his heart. Because Lu Xiaofeng blurted out three words.

Three words that saved his life.

-- Hua Manlou.

Other than Hua Manlou, who can ‘see’ in total darkness and not miss even a hairsbreadth on the position of the opponent’s heart?

Therefore, the hand that was filled with murderous aura suddenly became gentle, the gentle hand grabbed Lu Xiaofeng's hand.

Two hands. Two hands grabbing each other, representing the most precious feeling on earth.

-- Friendship.

“How can you be here?”

It was the question that both Lu Xiaofeng and Hua Manlou asked simultaneously.

In the darkness, although Lu Xiaofeng could not see Hua Manlou's face, he knew that Hua Manlou must be ‘staring’ at him. And then both of them burst out in laughter.

Hua Manlou pulled Lu Xiaofeng's arm and brought him to the table. “Please sit down,” he said.

Lu Xiaofeng sat down. Hua Manlou also sat down. “I don't have any lantern in here,” he said.

“We'll talk in the dark then,” Lu Xiaofeng replied.

“Shall we talk about how I ended up here first, or about how you came to this place?” Hua Manlou asked.

“Let’s talk about you,” Lu Xiaofeng replied.

“It was Honest Monk who brought me here,” Hua Manlou said.

“How could he bring you here?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“I have been investigating the invisible man behind the scenes for you,” Hua Manlou said, “Yet I did not find the slightest clue. Instead, I discovered another matter.”

“What is it?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Do you know that His Majesty is currently looking for Imperial Bodyguards?” Hua Manlou asked.

“I am a Jianghu man,” Lu Xiaofeng replied, “I have never been interested in this kind of things.”

“Actually, I did not care about this matter either,” Hua Manlou said, “But I heard a rumor that His Majesty is looking for you.”

“Looking for me?” Lu Xiaofeng was shocked.

“Are you surprised?” Hua Manlou said, “When I heard that news, I was also stunned, hence I follow the trail to investigate it further.”

“And what’s the result?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“The result is: the rumor turns out to be true,” Hua Manlou said.

“His Majesty is looking for me to become an Imperial Bodyguard?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Absolutely correct,” Hua Manlou replied.

“Why?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Because someone recommended you,” Hua Manlou replied.

“Someone recommended me?” Lu Xiaofeng asked, “Who?”

“Prince Taiping’s Heir Apparent,” Hua Manlou replied.

Lu Xiaofeng’s jaw dropped. It was quite a while before he found his voice back, “Prince Taiping’s Heir Apparent? Even if I use eight poles I would not be able to reach to where he is; why would he recommend me?”

“I don’t know,” Hua Manlou said.

“Besides,” Lu Xiaofeng continued, “Prince Taiping’s Heir Apparent has had some dealings with Jianghu people, how could he not know that I am like a wild crane leisurely flying over the clouds, how could I become an Imperial Bodyguard?”

“I can’t think of any intelligent answer either,” Hua Manlou said.

“Did you continue your investigation?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Yes,” Hua Manlou replied, “I did continue my investigation.”

“And what did you find?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Nothing,” Hua Manlou replied, “But I do know that one time Honest Monk went to see Prince Taiping’s Heir Apparent.”

“Oh!” Lu Xiaofeng was shocked.

“That’s why I went to visit Honest Monk,” Hua Manlou said.

“And then he brought you here?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“That’s right,” Hua Manlou replied.

“What did he tell you?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“He wanted to bring me here, saying that I would see you very soon,” Hua Manlou replied.

“Why did you attack me?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Hua Manlou said, “These past several nights, someone always sneaked in to attack me, I don’t know who he is, I asked Honest Monk, Honest Monk said he did not know either, he only told me to be careful, that it would be best if I could catch the person who attacked me sneakily alive, and then I would find out the truth.”

“But your attack to me was a killer attack,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“First,” Hua Manlou said, “I didn’t know it was you. Second, that man’s martial art skill was unusually high, plus he always came around the same time as you did. Other than launching killer attack, my chance is indeed not good. Luckily you suddenly recognized me.”

“Otherwise, the Lu Xiaofeng you saw would be a dead Lu Xiaofeng,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

Hua Manlou laughed. He said, “Your luck has always been good.”

Lu Xiaofeng was silent, because he suddenly remembered something.

-- Before his death, Ying Yan Laoqi said one word ‘Tai’.

-- Prince Taiping’s Heir Apparent? Prince Taiping’s Heir Apparent! [Orig. ‘tai ping wang shi zi’]

-- Could it be that Ying Yan Laoqi wanted to tell him about Prince Taiping’s Heir Apparent? Could it be that he wanted to tell Lu Xiaofeng about the secret

behind Prince Taiping's Heir Apparent's recommendation to the current Emperor?

Hua Manlou noticed Lu Xiaofeng's silence. "What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I am thinking about someone," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"What kind of person?" Hua Manlou asked.

"A dead person," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Who?" Hua Manlou asked.

"Ying Yan Laoqi," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

"Ying Yan Laoqi is dead?"

"That's right?"

"Before his death, what did he tell you?"

"One word, 'Tai'."

"Prince Taiping's Heir Apparent?" Hua Manlou asked.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

Now Hua Manlou was silent. He was in deep thought.

“Do you know this person, Prince Taiping’s Heir Apparent?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“I know nothing,” Hua Manlou replied, “What about you? Have you met this man?”

“I have never met him.”

“That’s odd. Why did he recommend you? What’s his purpose?”

“We must find someone,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“Honest Monk?” Hua Manlou asked.

“That’s right,” Lu Xiaofeng replied, “This question, he must have the answer.”

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly remembered another person; so he said, “No, we’d better find someone else.”

“Who?” Hua Manlou asked.

“Gong Jiu,” Lu Xiaofeng replied.

“Gong Jiu? Do you know where Gong Jiu is?”

“I came here, because Honest Monk brought me here. He said that there are three rooms here, one of them has Gong Jiu inside.”

“Let’s go to look for him then,” Hua Manlou said.

“No need,” a deep and low voice came from the outside.

Lanterns. Eight bright lanterns. Lanterns in the hands of eight gorgeous women, coming slowly from the outside into the room.

The man who talked was walking behind these eight beautiful women. Cold and proud; precisely such was the speaker’s expression.

It was Gong Jiu.

“It’s you?” Hua Manlou suddenly said.

“It’s me,” Gong Jiu replied, “You must have heard my footsteps clearly.”

“You are Gong Jiu?” Hua Manlou asked, “The one who attacked sneakily every night was you? Why?”

“Because I want you to develop a habit of trying to kill me,” Gong Jiu replied, “And then ...” Gong Jiu laughed a very conceited laugh.

“And then,” Lu Xiaofeng continued for him, “The one’s going to be killed would be me.”

“Absolutely right,” Gong Jiu said.

“Brilliant ‘murder-with-borrowed-knife’ scheme,” Hua Manlou said.

“Too bad the god of luck always takes care of Lu Xiaofeng,” Gong Jiu said, “It’s just that ...” speaking to this point, Gong Jiu humphed several times.

“It’s just that right now I am running out of luck?” Lu Xiaofeng probed.

“Luck,” Gong Jiu said, “There’s always a limit to ‘luck’.”

Lu Xiaofeng did not answer. The reason he did not answer was not that he did not have anything to say. Not at all. Rather, he believed that Gong Jiu had this kind of mentality, which was kind of beneficial to him, because it would mean that Gong Jiu was looking down on him, he was belittling him, and this characteristic would tend to make a person careless. And carelessness would often lead to failure.

To Lu Xiaofeng, the more Gong Jiu was looking down on him the better. In all honesty, he was rather afraid of Gong Jiu’s martial art skill. If Gong Jiu was looking down on him, he might have a chance to find a weak point in Gong Jiu’s carelessness, and then he would have a chance of victory.

It was Hua Manlou who opened his mouth. What he said was a question.

He asked, "Do you know Prince Taiping's Heir Apparent?"

Gong Jiu's response was very peculiar. His answer was, "I know Honest Monk."

"Oh?" Hua Manlou said.

Gong Jiu continued, "Honest Monk knows Prince Taiping's Heir Apparent, you think I don't know him?"

"Not necessary," Hua Manlou replied.

"Why not?" Gong Jiu asked.

Hua Manlou said, "Lu Xiaofeng knows Sha Man, but until now I have not seen Sha Man."

Gong Jiu laughed and said, "You will definitely see her."

"When?" Hua Manlou asked.

"When the time comes," Gong Jiu replied.

"Where?" Hua Manlou asked.

“On the way,” Gong Jiu replied.

“On the way?” Hua Manlou asked, “Which way?”

“On the way to the Yellow Springs[1],” Gong Jiu replied.

“You are going to kill us all?” Hua Manlou asked.

“Maybe,” Gong Jiu said.

“Do we have any choice in the matter?” Hua Manlou asked.

“Only one person does,” Gong Jiu replied.

“Who?” Hua Manlou asked.

“Lu Xiaofeng,” Gong Jiu replied.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at Gong Jiu. “I have a choice?” he asked.

“Yes,” Gong Jiu nodded.

“What choice?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Be an invisible man, or be a ghost,” Gong Jiu said.

“If I don’t want to be an invisible man, must I become a ghost?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“I can guarantee it, yes, you will,” Gong Jiu replied.

“Are you always that confident?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Yes,” Gong Jiu replied.

“But failed to run after me at Ximen Chuixue’s place,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

With a cold laugh Gong Jiu said, “Aren’t you in my hand right now?”

“It was me who voluntarily took the bait,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

Gong Jiu said, “If I don’t have the trump card, Sha Man, in my hand, would you come to take the bait?”

“With thousand ways, a hundred plans you lured me to this place, what is it that you want, actually?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Gong Jiu replied, “Be an invisible man, or be a ghost.”

“Why is it that if I don’t want to be an invisible man, I must become a ghost?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Because you may spoil my plan,” Gong Jiu replied.

“And those that may spoil your plan, you want them dead?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Yes,” Gong Jiu replied.

“What if I promise you that I won’t spoil your plan?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“I am still going to kill you,” Gong Jiu said.

“Why?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Because I don’t believe you,” Gong Jiu replied.

“Why don’t you believe me?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Because you are Lu Xiaofeng,” Gong Jiu replied, “If you do not interfere with this earth-shattering Wulin sensation, Lu Xiaofeng is not Lu Xiaofeng.”

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. “Contrary to my expectation, you know me very well,” he said.

“I don’t,” Gong Jiu said, “Someone else does.”

“The Little Old Man?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“That’s right,” Gong Jiu replied.

“All these are the Little Old Man’s idea?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Only he can think of these many brilliant schemes, and only you can complete his masterpiece,” Gong Jiu said.

“If I don’t agree, and you kill me, this masterpiece cannot be completed?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“That’s right,” Gong Jiu replied.

“Won’t that be a shame?” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“It is indeed regrettable,” Gong Jiu admitted, “That’s why all along we did not kill you, we are hoping that you will agree.”

“What’s in it for me?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“A lot,” Gong Jiu replied.

“Why don’t you tell me?” Lu Xiaofeng said, “Do your best to persuade me.”

“You can have Sha Man,” Gong Jiu said.

“That’s it?” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“You can enjoy endless glory, splendor, wealth and rank,” Gong Jiu said.

“I don’t want endless glory, splendor, wealth and rank,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“You can live a carefree and worry-free live, you can follow whatever your heart desires,” Gong Jiu said.

“How come?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Because if you complete this mission, whatever you want, as long as you open your mouth, you can have it,” Gong Jiu said.

“Anything?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“As long as there is such thing in the world, you can have it,” Gong Jiu replied.

“How can it be?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Because the one giving it to you is the Emperor,” Gong Jiu replied.

“The current Emperor?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“It isn’t,” Gong Jiu replied.

Lu Xiaofeng was puzzled. “It isn’t?” he asked.

“It’s the next Emperor,” Gong Jiu replied.

“Why would it be the next Emperor?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Because at that time the current Emperor will be no more,” Gong Jiu said.

“What do you mean ‘no more’?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Dead,” Gong Jiu replied indifferently, “When one is dead, of course he will be no more.”

“How can the Emperor die?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Anybody can die, why can’t the Emperor die?” Gong Jiu said.

“And the next Emperor, would it be the Prince Taiping’s Heir Apparent?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“No wonder the Little Old Man never stop praising you,” Gong Jiu said, “You are indeed very smart.”

Lu Xiaofeng said, “Prince Taiping’s Heir Apparent recommended me, so that I will have the opportunity to be in the Emperor’s presence?”

“That’s right,” Gong Jiu answered.

“You want me to become an invisible man so that when the time comes I can assassinate the Emperor?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Absolutely correct,” Gong Jiu replied.

“Wrong,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“Wrong?” Gong Jiu said.

“The Little Old Man is wrong,” Lu Xiaofeng said, “And I am also wrong. I thought the Little Old Man knew me very well, turns out he did not.”

“Why not?” Gong Jiu asked.

“He practically did not understand me,” Lu Xiaofeng said, “This kind of business, how can I do it? I can’t wait to stop it, how can I do it?”

“The Little Old Man is not necessarily wrong, but you are definitely wrong,” Gong Jiu said.

“Oh?” Lu Xiaofeng said, “Where am I wrong?”

“You overlooked something,” Gong Jiu said.

“What is it?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Human nature,” Gong Jiu replied.

“Human nature?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Gong Jiu said, “You overlooked that in human nature, there is love, there is fear, there is innate desire to seek riches and pleasure.”

“Did I overlook all those?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“You did,” Gong Jiu said, “That’s the reason the Little Old Man told us to keep reminding you.”

“And the way you reminding me is by kidnapping Sha Man?” Lu Xiaofeng said, “You use intimidation and profit to catch my attention?”

“Don’t you want Sha Man?” Gong Jiu asked, “Don’t you want to live together with Sha Man? Don’t you want to live a carefree and worry-free live, follow whatever your heart desires with Sha Man, living the rest of your lives like deities?”

“Those are the desires of everybody on earth,” Lu Xiaofeng said, “But, to achieve those things with hands that are reeking of blood, I believe there three people on this earth who definitely would not want to do it.”

“Which three people?” Gong Jiu asked.

“Him,” Lu Xiaofeng pointed to Hua Manlou.

“And who else?” Gong Jiu asked.

“Ximen Chuixue and me,” Lu Xiaofeng replied.

“Very well,” Gong Jiu said.

“Very well?” Lu Xiaofeng asked, “What do you mean ‘very well’?”

“What I mean by ‘very well’ is that I lured you to this place is a very good thing for us,” Gong Jiu replied.

“But in term of the Little Old Man’s plan, won’t it be a very bad thing?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“That is an inevitable regret,” Gong Jiu said.

“May I ask you a bit of question?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Of course you may,” Gong Jiu replied, “I have never concealed anything to anybody who is going to depart this earth very soon.”

“Is the Prince Taiping’s Heir Apparent also an invisible man?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Yes,” Gong Jiu replied.

“Was Cui Cheng killed by him?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Xiao Hongzhu and Cheng Zhong were also killed by him,” Gong Jiu said.

“Did he kill them when he entered the secret chamber?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Gong Jiu nodded, “That’s right,” he said, “Hence he had to spend money to bribe Ye Xingshi, so that he would say that Cui Cheng and the others have been killed for half a *sichen* [1 hour].”

“And all these things have been arranged well in advance?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“That’s right,” Gong Jiu replied, “Except you.”

“I was an incidental party-crasher,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“Due to your sudden appearance on the island, the Little Old Man had an idea of using you as an invisible man, to have you assassinate the Emperor,” Gong Jiu said.

“The most powerful invisible man today, is it Prince Taiping’s Heir Apparent?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“He has already courted a lot of capable helpers,” Gong Jiu said.

“Why didn’t he go assassinating the Emperor himself?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“He can’t do that,” Gong Jiu replied, “If he did the job himself, how can he win everybody’s support to be the successor of the throne?”

“Do you know Prince Taiping’s Heir Apparent very well?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“There’s nobody on earth know him better than I do,” Gong Jiu replied.

“Oh?” Lu Xiaofeng said, “Did you know him since childhood?”

“Before he came out of his mother’s womb, I already knew him,” Gong Jiu said.

“How come?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Because I am the Prince Taiping’s Heir Apparent,” Gong Jiu said.

Everyone was shocked. It was indeed a shocking news. Lu Xiaofeng stared at Gong Jiu in disbelief, he was speechless.

Gong Jiu looked at Lu Xiaofeng with a very proud expression on his face; he laughed and said, “Are you surprised by this secret?”

“I have not even dreamed about it,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“There is another thing that you have never dreamed about,” Gong Jiu said.

“What is it?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“You are going to die very soon,” Gong Jiu said.

Finished speaking, Gong Jiu pointed his finger outside.

Torches. Burning-bright torches.

Fifty torches in the hands of fifty big, burly, bare-chested men. Fifty men standing in a large circle.

“What does this mean?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“This is defined in four characters,” Gong Jiu said.

“Which four characters?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“*Ru di nan dun* [入地难遁 lit. entering the earth hard to escape],” Gong Jiu said.

As soon as he finished speaking, Gong Jiu clapped his hands.

More torches. More burning-bright torches.

Fifty more torches in the hands of fifty more big, burly, bare-chested men. Only these fifty men were not standing on the ground.

They were standing on the roof.

“And what does that mean?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Another set of four characters,” Gong Jiu replied.

“Which four characters?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“*Cha chi nan fei* [插翅难飞 lit. even given wings, you couldn't fly],” Gong Jiu replied.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed and said, “Looks like you are determined to kill me.”

“What you said is absolutely correct,” Gong Jiu said.

“Can I ask you another question?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Of course you can,” Gong Jiu replied.

“My question is: have you heard a saying?” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“Which saying?” Gong Jiu asked.

“This saying has one character less than your two sayings,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“Seven characters?” Gong Jiu asked, “Which seven characters?”

“*Zhi zhu si di er hou sheng* [置诸死地而后生 lit. life after various deaths],”
Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Gong Jiu let out a very condescending laugh. He said, “You don’t have a chance. Not the least bit of chance!”

Lu Xiaofeng said, “If you insist like that, it looks like I really don’t have the least bit of chance. Since I am going to die, can I ask a favor from you?”

“What is it?” Gong Jiu asked.

“Let Hua Manlou and Sha Man go,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“So be it,” Gong Jiu did not hesitate at all.

“I am thinking of another thing,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“The Little Old Man told me,” Gong Jiu said, “That I grant whatever request you may have before your death as much as possible. You may speak!”

“I’d like to see Sha Man,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“You will definitely see her,” Gong Jiu said.

“But not now?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“But not now,” Gong Jiu asserted.

“When?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Gong Jiu waved his hand and pointed outside. “You stand outside,” he said, “When you are facing me.”

“You are very formidable,” Lu Xiaofeng said, “You want to divide my attention?”

Gong Jiu said, “Don’t forget that the Little Old Man always thinks highly of you. I absolutely must not lower my guard against you. To be honest, when facing a powerful enemy, I will do anything to weaken my enemy’s willpower. This is my way of ensuring my victory.”

Lu Xiaofeng looked at Gong Jiu with profound respect; he really admired him, he realized that his previous view about Gong Jiu was wrong.

And then, Lu Xiaofeng held out his hand and said, “After you.”

“You ought to go first,” Gong Jiu replied.

“Why?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Because this is the way to the gates of hell,” Gong Jiu replied.

Dawn. The first light of dawn already appeared.

If daytime symbolizes life, then the coming of dawn symbolizes the birth of a new life. Yet how come the dawn Lu Xiaofeng was facing was actually a shadow of death?

What kind of formidable trump card did Gong Jiu have in his sleeve? Why did he look so confident and calm?

Very soon these questions were answered.

When Lu Xiaofeng was concentrating his entire mind's willpower, summoning the energy of his entire body, standing face to face in front of Gong Jiu, Gong Jiu suddenly clapped his hands lightly, and then Lu Xiaofeng saw the one he thought during the day, the one in his mind at night, Sha Man.

Lu Xiaofeng's willpower melted, in its place was his love toward Sha Man. The entire attention he has been focusing was now turned to Sha Man.

If right now Gong Jiu attacked Lu Xiaofeng, definitely Lu Xiaofeng would be defeated.

But Gong Jiu did not attack, he showed a very conceited expression, just like a cat looking at a dying mouse in its claw, the mouse was looking at a clump of cheese that it could not eat anymore.

Lu Xiaofeng fixed his gaze at Sha Man. Sha Man was also staring at Lu Xiaofeng, but oddly there was not the least bit distressed look on her eyes; rather, there was tranquility, there was serenity, just like the tranquil water surrounding a natural harbor.

It has taken Lu Xiaofeng by surprise. Even Gong Jiu was also taken aback.

Why did Sha Man look so peaceful? Didn't she know that Lu Xiaofeng was at critical moment where he was about to die?

Sha Man walked in steady steps, she walked slowly toward Lu Xiaofeng.

When she was near him, she suddenly turned around toward Gong Jiu. "Can I say something to him?" Sha Man asked Gong Jiu.

Without waiting for Gong Jiu's response, Sha Man added, "I only want to say two words."

Gong Jiu laughed and said, "Are you going to say 'goodbye' [再见], or is it 'we'll part forever' [永别]?"

Sha Man smiled. "The two words that I am going to say, only he and I will know," she replied.

"Please do as you wish!" Gong Jiu said.

Sha Man put her mouth close to Lu Xiaofeng's ears and spoke those two words.

What could those two words be?

Finished speaking, Sha Man slowly walked away. She stopped and stood behind Lu Xiaofeng, facing Gong Jiu.

Gong Jiu followed Sha Man with his eyes, and then he shifted his gaze to Lu Xiaofeng's face.

“Do you have anything to say?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Lu Xiaofeng replied, “And you?”

Gong Jiu tossed his head back and roared in wild laughter, “Please remember,” he said, “You are the one who is going to die. Not me!”

Lu Xiaofeng calmly asked, “Are we going to fight bare-handed?”

“No,” Gong Jiu replied, “You may pick your weapon.”

“Whatever weapon I choose, will you give it to me?” Lu Xiaofeng asked.

“Any weapon,” Gong Jiu said, “I have everything.”

“Very well,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“What weapon do you want?” Gong Jiu asked.

“Long whip,” Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Gong Jiu's countenance changed greatly. "Long whip?" he asked.

Lu Xiaofeng coldly said, "That's right, long whip!"

Gong Jiu sucked a few mouthfuls of cold air. Calming himself down, he clapped his hands.

Lu Xiaofeng already had the long whip in his hand.

"Are you going to fight empty-handed?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"My pair of hands is enough," Gong Jiu proudly declared.

Lu Xiaofeng shook the whip in his hand. "Very well," he said.

The whip emitted an ear piercing 'shua, shua' sound.

Gong Jiu's face suddenly changed, his eyes gradually turned red, as he stared at something behind Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng discovered that the eyes that were staring at something behind him were not limited to Gong Jiu's pair of eyes. The men standing on the roof, as well as those standing around them, every pair of eyes was staring at something behind Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng already knew what happened. He also understood why Sha Man

said those two words, ‘use whip’, to him.

Sha Man actually did not do anything, she simply stripped the clothes off her body.

Stripping her clothes is actually not a big deal, she was merely exposing her naked body; that’s all. When a human being was born, wasn’t he naked?

It’s just that the kind of feeling a naked baby invokes in people’s heart is one of wonder of the new life, while the kind of feeling a naked grown woman stirs up in people’s heart is one of lust.

Lust is human’s weak point. Especially for those who are about to fight, lust must not arise.

Especially for Gong Jiu. This was Gong Jiu’s weak point.

Sha Man understood Gong Jiu, she understood especially Gong Jiu’s weak point. Therefore, she wanted Lu Xiaofeng to use whip, while she sacrificed her sex appeal to stir up Gong Jiu’s lust.

The ‘shua, shua’ noise of the whip, plus the jade-like fair skin of Sha Man under the morning sun, made Gong Jiu panting for breath like a rogue ox who had just run several dozen *li*.

When Sha Man started to twist her waist and made all kinds of erotic movement, like a mad man Gong Jiu tore apart his own clothes. He gasped for breath while cried out madly, “Hit me! Hit me!”

Lu Xiaofeng pulled his whip back. With a compassion on his eyes he looked at Gong Jiu.

But with a pleading look Gong Jiu stared at Lu Xiaofeng and at the whip in his hand, and cried out, “Whip me! Quick! Quick!”

Sha Man also cried out, “Quick!”

However, Lu Xiaofeng did not whip Gong Jiu. He stabbed him. Channeling his internal energy toward the whip, he turned the flexible whip into a straight and stiff whip.

Lu Xiaofeng used this kind of stiff whip, the whip pierced Gong Jiu’s heart.

Silence fell.

Only the rising sun shed its light on the courtyard and the walls surrounding it, and the ground, the flowers, the trees, and the people in it.

A boat. A small boat.

A small boat floating on the sea, floating along the waves. A pair of feet was dangling from the edge of the boat. Lu Xiaofeng’s feet.

Lu Xiaofeng was lying comfortable on the boat. There was a cup of dark green wine resting on Lu Xiaofeng’s stomach.

He was feeling very happy. Because Sha Man's soft and tender body, as soft and tender as a Persian cat, was lying by his side.

Sha Man picked up the wine cup on Lu Xiaofeng's stomach. She bit Lu Xiaofeng's lip and spoke in a gentle voice, "You know what?"

"What?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"The current Emperor really want to see you now," Sha Man replied.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled. "You know what?" he asked.

"What?" Sha Man asked.

"I really want to be an invisible man now," Lu Xiaofeng replied.

Sha Man jumped in fright. "Why?" she asked, "Are you going to assassinate the Emperor now?"

Lu Xiaofeng scrutinized Sha Man's face. "Are you really that stupid?" he asked.

"I am indeed stupid," Sha Man said, "If you don't like it, just toss me to the bottom of the ocean and be done with it."

But Lu Xiaofeng hugged Sha Man even tighter. He said, "Xiao Yu ran away,

Ximen Chuixue and Hua Manlou have also returned to their peaceful and quiet world. Jianghu is peace and quiet once again. If I don't take advantage of this opportunity to live in seclusion with you, becoming a couple of immortals, invisible from Jianghu, can I still be considered a human being?"

Sha Man sighed. "You are not a human to begin with!" she exclaimed.

"Are you saying I am not a human?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "What am I? A pig?"

Sha Man said, "You are not a human, you are not a pig either. You are a phoenix [Feng from Lu Xiaofeng's name], you are Lu Xiaofeng, the Lu Xiaofeng who is flying blissfully in nine [Jiu, from Gong Jiu's name] layers of heaven."

[1] Yellow Springs – the underworld, equivalent of Hades or Hell in Chinese mythology.

Lu Xiaofeng Book 7: Laughter of the Sword God

[剑神一笑 Jian Shen Yi Xiao]

Written By Gu Long

Translated by Foxs

Preface: Sword and the Sword God

Sword, it is a kind of weapon, and also one of the eighteen arms. However, it is different than the rest of the weapons. We can even say that compared to the other weapons, there was a significant distance in term of status.

The first and foremost function of a weapon is no more than to kill and attack the enemy. But sword is some kind of a symbol of identity and honor. Monarch, generals, ministers, nobilities and scholars often use sword as elegant decoration.

This fact can already illustrate the special status of the sword in people's mind.

Even more special is that sword and scholar and poetry and literature have extremely close relationship.

Li Bai [701-762, famous Tang Dynasty poet] wielded a sword.

He was a poetry-immortal, and also a sword-knight. Evidently his swordsmanship was not as good as his poetry. Therefore, he was known for his poetry, and not for his swordsmanship.

In the ancient China, the first person famous for his swordsmanship also happened to be surnamed Li. The Great Li General's swordsmanship not

only dazzled and stunned people of his era, making them sigh and hold their breath, but also brought about endless fantasy to the generations after him.

But the first person who combined the word 'sword' and 'god' [or divine], these two characters together, was the 'grass-script sage' Zhang Xu [probably early 8th century, Tang Dynasty poet and calligrapher, most famous for his grass script].

Zhang Xu was also a Tang poet. In Li Zhao's [c. 800, Tang dynasty scholar and official] 'National History Supplement', there was a segment:

I began to hear about the Princess and the porter [referring to 'carrying burden with shoulder poles'] striving for the road, like the meaning behind a brushwork [referring to calligraphy]; later on watching Gongsun Clan brandishing a sword-device [剑器 –jian qi, with 'qi' means device/tool/utensil] like a deity.

Some say that the sword-device mentioned was not really a sword, but a kind of dance props. Some other say that sword-device was some kind of colored ribbon [streamer] tied onto a dagger, the kind of props women during the Jin and Tang Dynasties used for dancing. But some say that it was really a weapon.

Concerning this, Mr. Jin Yong and I have had some correspondence discussion. Even a very-learned and well-informed man like Mr. Jin Yong was unable to make a definitive statement. Since this sort of thing was from a distant past of the Jin and Tang dynasties, most of it cannot be verified in our present age. Every school of thoughts has its own opinion, which other school of thoughts cannot confirm.

We can only say that if sword-device was a kind of sword, then undoubtedly the Young Lady Gongsun was the first person who was called the Sword God.

Or perhaps it was the origin of the word 'Divine Sword'.

A person that could be called Sword God or Sword Immortal, other than their swordsmanship must already reach perfection, there must be some other conditions he must meet.

That's is: his integrity and moral quality.

Because a sword's standing among the weapons is unique and transcendent, because it is different than any ordinary weapon.

Therefore, if someone could win the accolade of others as a Sword God, his moral quality and integrity must be a lot higher than most ordinary people.

Naturally the number of people who could achieve this state can't be too many. In every three, five hundred years period, there were no more than three, five people.

Even in the martial art novels that people considered most absurd, this kind of people are not many. In a bit more conservative works, these people are few and far between.

Because 'Sword God' and 'Sword Immortal' [剑神 and 剑仙, respectively] are not the same, 'Sword Immortal' appears a lot more in martial art novels.

Especially in martial art novels 还珠楼主 [huan zhu luo zhu], 平江不肖生 [ping jiang bu xiao sheng], even in 朱贞木 [zhu zhen mu] there are quite a number of Sword Immortal's appearances; all could use sword aura as defense mechanism, defensive sword kills people thousand li away. [I do not have enough literary knowledge to translate all those titles, I don't even know who the authors were.]

It's just that they were not Sword Gods.

Because they all lacked one kind of air, the air of arrogance.

I always feel that to become a Sword God, this air of arrogance is absolutely indispensable. Just with this air of arrogance, they can even consider their own lives as worthless.

Because they have already given their lives to the way [of life] they loved ardently.

Their way [of life] is the sword.

Since they are looking for neither immortality nor enlightenment [lit. Buddhism], the success or failure, fame and profit of the secular world, are even less worthy for them to look after, are not worthy of their laughter.

All they wanted was the honor and glory when they brandished their swords, which, in their view, a split second was eternal.

In order to attain this split second peak, they did not hesitate to sacrifice their life.

In the world of martial art novels, a few are qualified to be called Sword Gods.

I dare not to be unduly humble, I always thought that Ximen Chuixue can be considered one of them.

Sword God's laughter.

Ximen Chuixue is also a man with blood, tears, and laughter, as well as all kinds of emotion common to mankind. It's just that he never expressed those emotions.

He can go riding alone to places thousands of li away, to fight a life or death battle in the wink of an eye with another martial art expert, simply to avenge or redress an injustice for someone who was a total stranger to him.

But if he thought that it was not worth doing, even if his only friend in the world, Lu Xiaofeng, begged him to go, he simply won't go.

He even has a little bit of sense of humor.

There was one time, he obviously had the intention of doing something on Lu Xiaofeng's behalf, yet he insisted on Lu Xiaofeng having this two mustache, that did not look like mustache but looked like eyebrows, shaved.

In short, this man was totally unpredictable and unthinkable.

This man's sword has never been defeated.

To develop such an undefeated state, naturally one must undergo an unimaginably arduous and difficult training. To cultivate this kind of arrogant character, naturally one must undergo an unimaginably difficult process.

Bitter tears and miserable hardship of the past, he would never mention it in front of anybody else. Naturally others must not know.

But everybody knows one thing. Ximen Chuixue has never laughed.

A flesh and blood with emotion, how come he never laugh? Could it be that he really does not laugh?

I don't believe it.

At least I know that he did laugh, once. In an exceptionally fantastic matter, in an extremely unusual situation, he once laughed.

I have always wanted to write about this fantastic situation, because I

believe that after reading about this matter, anybody would be like Ximen Chuixue, anybody won't be able to refrain from laughing.

To be able to make everybody laugh, is probably one of the two main reasons I write.

Earning money is, of course, the other main reason I write.

Gu Long.

70[1], 5, 2 between very late at night and very early in the morning, with wine without a sword.

[1] Wuxiapedia says Gu Long wrote this book in 1981, so I don't know what these numbers are referring to.

Part I – Lu Xiaofeng

Chapter 1 – A stab of pain of the finger on yellow soil[1]

(One)

A piece of land, a yellow sandy soil land.

Clear sky. The sun was about to set.

Lu Xiaofeng walked along a yellow sandy soil land under the setting sun. Under the glow of the setting sun, the yellow soil looked red, as red as blood.

The blood has already dried up and coagulated like the yellow soil.

Lu Xiaofeng, using his world-renowned two fingers, jabbed the yellow soil. This pair of fingers had broken countless sabers and swords belonging to famous heroes of the Wulin world. Yet he suddenly felt a stab of pain.

Because he knew that on the soil was his friend's blood.

(Two)

The last time Lu Xiaofeng and 'One Sword Riding the Wind' Liu Rugang [Liu – willow, Ru Gang – like/similar to steel] drank together was already

seven months ago.

When Liu Rugang was slightly drunk, he suddenly poured two large bowls of wine and insisted that Lu Xiaofeng drank the toast with him.

He had his reasons.

"We get drunk tonight, henceforth we part. There's a good possibility that we won't see each other for thirty-five months." He said, "There's also a good possibility we won't see each other ever again."

"Why?" Lu Xiaofeng urgently asked.

"Because early in the morning tomorrow, I am going to a place where the flowers are not fragrant, the birds do not sing, the fowls do not fly, the dogs do not jump, and the hares do not defecate."

"What are you going to do?"

Liu Chengfeng [riding the wind, see his title above] laughed. "You know what I do, you also ought to know what I am going to do."

Liu Chengfeng was the first Sect Leader-disciple[2] of Ba Shan [Mt. Ba in eastern Sichuan], a direct disciple of the founder. His 'seven by seven, forty-nine hands turning-the-wind, dancing-the-willow sword' may not be considered number one in Jianghu, but it could not be outside the big five either.

This kind of sword technique absolutely needs qinggong [lightness skill] to supplement it. His sword technique and qinggong were equally respected and admired by the people of the Wulin world.

Yet the reason people admired him the most was not his martial art skill, but his personality.

Throughout history, there were countless nouns people used to describe the 'willow' [Liu]. Some say willows are like silk, some say willows are like snow. But whether it was silk or snow, in people's eyes, willows have always carried 'soft/flexible' connotation.

Naturally our Mr. 'Willow' also had his 'soft' side like silk or snow. His thorough thought was like silk, his anger was like snow, *i.e.* it would be dissolved in the blink of an eye.

But his character was as strong as steel.

Naturally Lu Xiaofeng knew what kind of man he was.

"What you are going to do must be a very dangerous business, so you say such thing."

Liu Rugang did not answer. Not answering oftentimes equal to silently agree.

"Can you tell me what you are going to do?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

Mr. Liu still did not say anything.

In this case, not talking means he really did not want Lu Xiaofeng to know what he was going to do.

No doubt it was a highly classified secret.

No doubt Lu Xiaofeng could be considered his best friend; if he was unwilling to speak in front of Lu Xiaofeng, no doubt that he would also be unwilling to speak in front of any other person.

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng no longer asked.

Lu Xiaofeng only asked, "The place you are going, where even rabbits do not defecate, what kind of place is that?"

Liu Chengfeng was silent for a long time before he finally said, "Even if I told you, you wouldn't know that place, but I can still tell you." He said, "It is a small town faraway near the northwest border. The town is called Huangshi [lit. yellow stone], 'huang' from 'huangjin' [yellow gold], 'shi' from 'shitou' [rock/stone]."

(Three)

Ever since they parted, Liu Chengfeng vanished from the face of the earth; seven, eight months passed, nobody saw his shadow. Nobody knew where he went.

Only Lu Xiaofeng knew. Because Liu Rugang always considered Lu Xiaofeng a friend with whom he could share a secret, a friend with whom he could share trials and tribulations.

But Lu Xiaofeng did not know what happened to him in that small town? Why did he suddenly disappear?

Lu Xiaofeng was a friend with enough yiqi [spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice, code of brotherhood], plus he loved to meddle in other people's business. Coming across this kind of mystery, what do you say he would do?

He, of course, hastened to the small town.

[1] Yellow sandy soil typical of north China.

[2] Orig. 掌门弟子 – zhang men dizi, referring to a sect leader who still has 'elders/seniors' in his sect. Zhuo Yihang of White Hair Demoness was a Sect Leader-disciple of Wudang Pai, *i.e.* he still had his martial uncles in Wudang, although he was the Sect Leader.

Chapter 2 – An extremely poor man

(One)

Plateau, yellow sandy soil, sand storm.

The town of Huangshi was located in this sand storm-prone plateau. From a distance, rolling waves of yellow sandy soil looked like rolling waves of golden sand.

In this small town, there has always been a legend. Around here somewhere, there was a huge amount of buried treasure. There was nothing else in this treasure, except gold; a lot of gold, that nobody could even estimate how much there was.

Regrettably, nobody could find it, nobody has ever seen these gold. All they could see was the continually rolling waves of golden sand, blown by eternal wind on this plateau.

Gold is everybody's dream, but boundless golden sand was like nightmare. The dream of gold died out, the people who looked for gold have left. Over time, the small town slowly sank, so that nowadays it was a desolate town, with almost nobody ever travelled to it.

The only people left as inhabitants of this town were those who had nowhere else to go; they were already prepared to grow old and die in this place. Seeing an unfamiliar visitor from afar, they would always feel very happy and excited.

When Lu Xiaofeng arrived in this town, their attitude towards him was exactly like that.

Upon entering the town, Lu Xiaofeng felt that he had never seen such warmth and excitement. But the first thing he saw was a very poor street, and an extremely poor man.

Actually, this man could not be considered a man yet, because he was still a half grownup, but not a little child anymore. His clothes could not be considered clothes, it was no more than tattered rags. He was wearing an extremely languid posture as he sat under the eaves of a house on the corner of the street.

Actually, he could not be considered sitting either, rather, he curled up, just like a caterpillar curling up right there, or a small turtle curling up in its shell.

He had no money, he had no family, he had no friend, and had no future. He had nothing.

He was afraid.

He was afraid of everything. Therefore, he could only curl up in a ball, withdrawing into his shell, hiding from the most terrifying poverty, hunger, contempt and setback.

Because he was a kid, he actually did not know that he should be afraid of these things. No matter how he hid in his shell, he would never escape these things.

But when he saw Lu Xiaofeng, his eyes suddenly lit up. His pair of shiny eyes turned out to be a pair of big, lovely eyes.

When this pair of eyes saw Lu Xiaofeng, it simply looked like a hungry dog seeing a pile of dung, or a tortoise seeing a grain of mung bean. Fortunately Lu Xiaofeng was neither a mung bean nor a dog poo. When Lu Xiaofeng walked over to him, Lu Xiaofeng only wanted to ask a question.

When someone came to a strange place, and he was planning on staying in this place for a day, the first thing he wanted to ask was naturally where the inn around this place was, he wanted to find out where he could meet his most basic necessity of board and lodging.

"Inn?" the kid laughed until even his nose was wrinkly. "You want to know where the inn is? This place is so poor that even rabbits won't come here to crap, so poor that even flies and rats are dying of hunger; how could there be any inn?"

"Not even one inn in this place?"

"Not even half an inn in this place."

"Then what happen if there is a traveler passing through and wants to spend the night?"

"Nothing." The little beggar said, "Because basically nobody wants to pass through here. Even if they have to travel several dozen li farther, they

would rather not pass through this place.”

Lu Xiaofeng stared at this dirty, annoying, lazy, and talkative little beggar for half a day. [Translator’s note: this is literal translation, I leave it to the readers to interpret it as 12 hours or simply as a figure of speech.] He could not help but asking, “Is this place really that poor?”

The little beggar sighed. “Not only poor,” he said, “It will practically drag the people to die in poverty. Not only it will drag me down to die in poverty, even if there are other people who won’t be dragged down to die in poverty, they will be dragged down to at least half dead in poverty.”

“But it looks like you are not dead yet,” Lu Xiaofeng said.

“It’s because I still have a bit of skill to survive.”

“What kind of skill?”

“I am a little beggar, I don’t need much rice to survive. Poor people like me, no matter where we are, we will be able to survive.”

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. “I seem to remember you saying that the people in this place are so poor that they are going to die in poverty, how could they have any leftovers to feed you?”

The little beggar also laughed, “Da Shaoye [big young master], you look like a real Da Shaoye; the affair of a little beggar like me, naturally you won’t understand.”

"Oh?"

"A little beggar like me, in a poor place where I am almost butchered and made into soup daily, yet I am still able to survive, naturally I have side business."

"Side business?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "What side business?"

"Speaking about this kind of things, it really involves a great deal of knowledge." The little beggar suddenly sat up straight and puffed his chest out, "In this aspect, I can be considered an expert."

Lu Xiaofeng seemed to have more and more interest toward this little beggar.

The little beggar said, "To tell you the truth, I have more than one side businesses. Too bad from among seventy, eighty businesses, only two can really be used to earn money."

"Which two?"

"The first and most profitable is running into people like you, an outsider with more money than sense, who come to this place." He pointed to Lu Xiaofeng and continued, "People with more money than sense like you, if I don't cheat some money, then I am not cheating in vain, but if I cheat your money, I am also cheating in vain."

"You are damn right," Lu Xiaofeng said with a wry smile, "And now I seem to admire you a little bit."

He asked the little beggar again, "But if there is no sucker like me, what do you do?"

"Then I will have to rely on my second side business." The little beggar continued, "My second side business is stealing; if there is any opportunity to steal, I steal, if I see money, I steal. There is no friend or relative, no matter what, no matter how much, I steal everything, leave nothing."

It was the little beggar's doctrine of survival. But Lu Xiaofeng did not feel any disdain toward him at all, neither did he have any desire to curl his fist and give a big punch on his face; he felt a gut-wrenching grief instead.

Aren't there many, many reputable people in this world whose survival doctrine is exactly the same as this shameless little beggar?

(Two)

This small town was indeed very poor. Lu Xiaofeng has travelled everywhere, even to the other end of the world, yet has never seen any place more desolate and more impoverished than this place.

He really could not imagine why someone like Liu Chengfeng would come to a place like this? Even more difficult to understand: how could anything happen in this kind of place, something deserving Liu

Chengfeng's attention that disregarding the distance of a thousand li he came here? Not only that, whatever it was, it made Liu Chengfeng felt that there was a life or death danger in it.

A small, unknown town. A world renowned master swordsman. These two are not supposed to mix together.

The strange thing was that Liu Chengfeng seemed to have some kind of mysterious and strange relationship with this little town.

Stranger still, Liu Chengfeng seemed to really disappear from this little mysterious world.

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng was determined to find the relationship between the little town and his good friend.

Unfortunately, the only person he met so far was this wretched, pitiful, yet a bit endearing, little beggar.

Lu Xiaofeng had been to a lot of places, he had wandered to the ends of the earth, he had roamed big and small, all kinds and sorts, of cities, towns, villages, and desolate places. No matter where he went, there must be a least one grocery store.

Even if that place did not have any hotel, no brothel, no linen and silk fabric shop, no bakery and pastry shop, no horse and mule market, no grain store, but at least there must be a grocery store.

Because grocery store is where people find supplies of their most basic

needs.

Throughout his life, Lu Xiaofeng has seen countless strange, curious grocery stores. Some grocery stores could even supply some unusual, special requests. But Lu Xiaofeng has never seen any grocery store as peculiar as this grocery store.

Naturally this grocery store was located in this small town, yet the name of the grocery store was 'Big Eye'. Naturally it was that little-turtle-like little beggar who brought him to this store.

The signboard above the store has already become like a piece of gravestone by the wind, the sand and the soot. It was engraved with a large eye. 'Big Eye', the 'Big Eye Grocery Store'.

Lu Xiaofeng shook his head, "The name of this store is very strange."

"It's not strange at all." The little beggar said, "The owner of the store is called Wang Dayan [lit. big eye], it's only natural that his grocery store is called the 'Big Eye'."

Even after hearing this explanation, Lu Xiaofeng still did not understand it.

In fact, anybody who has not seen Wang Dayan would never fully understand the meaning of those words.

Because people like Wang Dayan were indeed rarely seen.

Chapter 3 - Wang Dayan's Grocery Store

(One)

Every day when the evening arrived, there were always a lot of people in Wang Dayan's grocery store.

Because not only this store sold all kinds of daily necessities, it also carried miscellaneous goods from north and south, also served pot-stewed dish, and wine. Outside, underneath a thatched awning, there were three wooden tables with seven, eight wooden benches.

Everybody sat down, left hand holding half-eaten piece of duck head or a piece of dried tofu, right hand holding a half bowl of aged wine, while chatting and babbling with each other on all kinds of topics, from north to south and east to west. Even if they have had a bad day, after drinking and chatting like that, they would inevitably feel deliriously happy.

This place was probably the only place in town where people find entertainment.

Wang Dayan always acted like the most gracious host, always laughing and joking around with these people. Not only they were his patrons, they have already become his friends.

But the number of people who saw him for the first time and was not startled by his appearance was probably not many.

Wang Dayan was tall and big and thick and fat, plus he was a hunchback. His left eye probably did not differ too much from ordinary people's eyes, but his right eye looked like a chicken egg protruding outside the socket of his eye.

Later on someone asked Lu Xiaofeng, "When you first see him, how did you feel?"

Lu Xiaofeng's feeling toward him was: "At that time, I only felt that this man was ugly, the kind of ugliness that it's rarely seen in the world. But after you talk to him for about an hour, you will immediately forget that he is ugly."

Lu Xiaofeng then added, "That's why he was able to marry a slutty wife who, when most men see her, they would want to take her to bed."

Behind the grocery store, there was a small wooden cabin, most probably it was originally a firewood storage shed, but now a wooden bed was put in there. It even had a white bed sheet on it. At least some time in the past the bed sheet was really made of plain white cotton cloth.

A sheet of red paper was pasted above the headboard of the bed. The paper said:

"Lodging rate: Single person, fifty qian per night. One diao[1] per month. Two persons, eighty qian per night."

It was the lady boss, who could not stop swaying her hip, who brought

Lu Xiaofeng here. With narrowed eyes she looked at Lu Xiaofeng and said with a laugh, "Gongzi Ye [basically it also means 'young master'], I seemed to hear just now from that old son of a b1tch of our house that you are surnamed Lu."

"Correct, I am surnamed Lu."

"Lu Gongzi, that little beggar son of a b1tch brought you to our place here, he really brought you to the right place."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly laughed. He looked at the tariff pasted on the wall above the bed and laughed.

"But I really thought that I have come to the wrong place. Looking at your price, I thought I have come to a black inn [inn that kills and robs guests]."

"Lu Gongzi, then you are greatly mistaken. Here, not only we can take care of your food and lodging, we can also take a good care of your other needs. Would you still say that this price is expensive?"

Lu Xiaofeng looked at the wooden bed, which looked like it would collapse at any time, and at the bed sheet, which looked somewhat yellow, somewhat grey, and somewhat black, practically it was impossible to tell what the original color was; with a wry laugh he said, "No matter what, if I have to spend fifty qian every night to sleep in this kind of bed, I will slightly feel that I am indeed someone with more money than sense."

As if it was an afterthought, the lady boss used her unexpectedly pretty

and slim finger to point to the two characters 'two persons' on the red paper, while her pair of coquettish eyes was smiling like silk, "What if I want you to spend eighty qian a night?"

Lu Xiaofeng looked at her eyes, he looked at her hands, he looked at her waist; suddenly he sighed gently. "In that kind of circumstance, even spending eight hundred qian, it is still worth it," Lu Xiaofeng said, "It's just too bad ..."

"Too bad what?" the lady boss inquired.

Lu Xiaofeng did not reply, he did not open his mouth at all. The lady boss fixed her gaze at him, her silk-like pair of coquettish eyes suddenly opened wide like apricots.

"Lu Gongzi, I shouldn't ask you this, but my heart could not bear not to ask."

"Then by all means, ask."

"Such a rundown place like ours, a man of your stature, why did you come here?"

"So what kind of man would come here?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Usually there are two kinds of men," the lady boss replied, "The first kind are money grubbers, who believe that around this place somewhere, there is indeed a very large silver treasure, so they come here wanting to make a fortune. This kind of men is our most welcomed guests. Because

although they cannot make a fortune, they always make us make a small fortune."

She sighed, "Too bad for the past few years this kind of men is getting more and more rare," she added.

Lu Xiaofeng could not resist asking, "And the second kind?"

The lady boss fixed her gaze at him, "The second kind are those that are on the run and cannot find any other place to hide. They are wanted by the authority or being pursued by avenging family to be killed, and could not find any other way to run, hence they come here to lie low for a while."

Lu Xiaofeng stared back at her, "And to which group do you think I belong to?" he asked.

The lady boss sighed again, "I think you don't look like you belong to either group, but after careful consideration, you also look like you belong to both groups."

Lu Xiaofeng looked at her again, from head to toe, from toe back to head, he swept his gaze over her one more time, while shaking his head, and ran his fingers over his moustache that looked like a pair of eyebrows.

"Lady Boss," he said, "I know that you are a woman who understands men very well. But this time you are mistaken."

"Oh?"

"Whether I belong to one of those two groups you are talking about, even if I originally belonged to one of those, now I have become the third kind."

"The third kind?" the lady boss asked, "Tell me, which third kind is that?"

"The third kind is naturally also some kind of criminals."

"What kind of crime do they usually commit?" the lady boss asked.

Lu Xiaofeng deliberately did not look anywhere else on her body or her face, he stared intently at her legs. "What's your guess?" Lu Xiaofeng deliberately narrowed his eyes as he asked again, "What's your guess on which crime they did?"

A tint of blush seemed to suddenly appeared on the lady boss' face, coupled with a seemingly unstoppable urge to clamp her legs together, her long, thick, sturdy, yet well-proportioned legs.

"That kind of person," she said, "I do not like." Her eyes shone coquettishly, "I believe you are not that kind of person."

Most men know that there are a lot of times women would say something contrary to what they were thinking in their hearts. When they say they did not like it, there's a good chance that they actually like it; not only that, they might like it so much.

Naturally Lu Xiaofeng was not the kind of man who did not understand women. If he said that he did not understand the real meaning behind what a woman told him, his friends would absolutely refuse to believe.

Yet right now he just seemed not to understand at all; moreover, his expression suddenly became very serious.

"That kind of person," he said, "I don't like them either. I assure you that I am definitely not that kind of person."

"Oh?"

"I came here, simply to look for a friend." Lu Xiaofeng went on, "... a money grubber friend."

"You have money grubber friend too?" the lady boss asked.

"Everybody wants to get rich, of course I have some money grubber friends; who don't want to get rich?" Lu Xiaofeng said, "That friend of mine also heard the legend that there are treasure around this place, he asked me to finance his endeavor five hundred taels of silver. Who would have thought that as soon as he came here, his shadow disappeared?"

"And you are looking for him?"

"Not only I want to look for him, I want to retrieve the five hundred taels as well." Lu Xiaofeng stared at the lady boss' legs again, "Five hundred

taels, even if I used it to sleep on the double bed, I can sleep well for several hundred nights.”

The lady boss suddenly turned around; without looking back she walked away. It was as if she did not even feel like giving Lu Xiaofeng one more look.

Lu Xiaofeng was about to run after her when suddenly he realized a big eye was looking at him.

(Two)

If one had not seen Wang Dayan but only know his manners toward people and his voice with which he spoke to other people, one would certainly think that he was a jovial gentleman.

“Lu Gongzi, I know whom you are looking for.” Wang Dayan said, “The friend that you are looking for, wasn’t he surnamed Liu, Liu Daxia [great hero]?”

“How do you know?”

“Before you came here, the one staying in this room was precisely Liu Daxia.”

“And where is he now?”

Although Wang Dayan’s as-big-as-crystal-ball eye did not show any

emotion, the other eye was brimming with sorrow and regret.

"Liu Daxia was indeed a real man; he was magnanimous, and full of yiqi. Too bad you are one step too late."

"One step too late?" Lu Xiaofeng struggled hard to maintain his composure. "Is he dead?"

"Uh huh."

With a very gentle and polite voice Boss Wang said, "Lu Gongzi, you are a sensible person, you ought to know that no matter who, when one died, his body is usually kept inside a coffin."

Lu Xiaofeng was silent for a long time. "In that case, I came here this time, most probably I won't be able to see him."

"You are most probably right."

"I wonder, is it possible for me to see his body and his coffin?"

"Of course it's possible."

"Where is his coffin?"

Wang Dayan's voice was even more gentle, even more polite, "It seems to me that coffins should be located in a coffin shop."

(Three)

Naturally a coffin shop is not as ubiquitous as a grocery store, unexpectedly a Godforsaken little town like this also had a coffin shop. As soon as Lu Xiaofeng went to the town's main street, its only street, he saw the coffin shop.

There was an old and worn out large high-back chair outside the coffin shop, and on that bench lay a dead man.

Later on Lu Xiaofeng found out that that man was not dead, moreover, he was the owner of the coffin shop. Perhaps he had taken care of too many dead men, so that he had sixty, seventy, or eighty percent appearance of a dead man.

His name was very weird as well.

This coffin shop was located right opposite to the grocery store. The owner of the grocery store was called Wang Dayan, the coffin shop's owner was called Zhao Xiazi [lit. 'blind man'].

All along he was sitting quietly like a dead man on the chair, as if he did not dare to expect anybody would visit his business. Such a small town, maybe the number of living persons was already dwindling, naturally the number of dead persons couldn't be much. Therefore, seeing Lu Xiaofeng, he immediately sprang out of his chair.

"This young master, who died in your honorable home? What kind of

coffin do you need?"

His face also looked like a dead man, completely without any trace of blood, without any emotion, yet he was making an attempt to fawn on the customer, albeit without any success at all. As a result, his face looked even more mysterious and creepy.

Lu Xiaofeng could only smile wryly, "These days there is no more people that can die in my home," Lu Xiaofeng said, "I just want to see someone."

Zhao Xiazi's face was downcast, he returned to his seat. Even his voice became cold and indifferent. "In that case, I am afraid you have come to the wrong place." He said, "Here, apart from me, everybody else is dead."

"In that case, I have not come to the wrong place." Lu Xiaofeng said, "The one I wanted to see is a dead man."

Zhao Xiazi even closed his eyes, the eyes that looked more like belonging to dead people than living people, with more white than black. "Too bad that even dead people, only one remains here right now."

"Most probably the one I wanted to see is him," Lu Xiaofeng said.

Zhao Xiazi suddenly sprang on his feet again, "You knew Liu Daye [big master], are you going to retrieve his remains?"

Lu Xiaofeng nodded, "Yes."

Zhao Xiazi heaved a very long sigh, as if a very heavy burden has just been removed from his shoulder.

"I'll take you to see him," Zhao Xiazi said, "Follow me."

The chair where Zhao Xiazi sat was situated outside the coffin shop, in the shade under the eaves. Inside the door, the room was filled with coffins. There were two that were already painted, and five, six others that have not been painted. Passing through this room, there was a small courtyard with piles of logs of wood. There were bent nails everywhere, and curly wood shavings from the carpenter's plane. There was also an exceptionally big saw leaning against a strange looking wooden shelf. This saw looked like one that would be used by a giant. Next to the saw there was an unfinished coffin.

Lu Xiaofeng's interest was piqued; he could not resist asking, "Such a big saw, only people with big strength can use it, right?"

"Must be so."

"Where is he? How come I haven't seen him?"

"You have already seen him." Zhao Xiazi pointed to his own nose, "That person is me." He casually said, "Each coffin sold in this place, I personally make them all."

Lu Xiaofeng discovered that although the boss of this coffin shop spent his days like a dead man outside the shop, that although his face looked

like a dead man, and his appearance was ugly, he was actually a big and tall man. Although he was a bit slouching, but comparatively speaking, he was still a head taller than ordinary men, plus the muscles on his entire body looked solid and springy. Only a man who is used to physical labor would have such muscles.

The first time you saw him, you may think that he looked like a dead man; but the longer you look at him, the more he did not look like a dead man.

Behind the courtyard there were two rows of rooms, the row on the left had two rooms, the row on the right also had two rooms. The rooms on the left looked like a kitchen and a firewood storage, the kind of room a servant would use. The rooms on the right looked gloomy and dark, even the window-covering papers were very dark green, almost black. The two rooms appeared to be enveloped in some kind of black hue, even on a bright day like today the rooms gave a man some kind of gloomy and eerie feeling.

"This is where we put the coffin before burial." Zhao Xiazi lighted a fire, "When people in here died, before burial the body is usually placed in this room, that's the reason I call these two rooms 'haunted house'."

"Haunted house?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "So the house is haunted?"

Under the light from the fire, Zhao Xiazi's pale face looked a bit like a ghost's face; but he shook his head and said, "Coffin shop does not have any ghost in it, coffin shop takes care of dead people. Dead people become ghosts, taking care dead people means taking care of ghosts. I am taking care of them, how can they come to haunt this place?"

What he said was actually very reasonable and fair, even if Lu Xiaofeng wanted to disagree, he simply could not. But as Lu Xiaofeng walked toward the two rooms, he felt a dark cold chill creeping up from his back to his head, and then down to the soles of his feet.

Lu Xiaofeng was certainly not a faint-hearted man, his guts was big; practically these four characters 'dan da bao tian' [lit. guts so big it wraps the sky; definition: reckless/extremely daring] can be used to describe him, even his enemy had to admit. In this world, there was nothing Lu Xiaofeng did not dare to do.

Yet led by Zhao Xiazhi, with torch in his hand, into one of these two rooms on the right, he felt as if the arch of his feet was clammy with cold sweats.

The light of the torch was dimmer than candle light. Under the glow of this kind of light, the interior of the room simply looked like the inside of a tomb.

When he walked inside, his feeling was like walking into a grave.

Naturally there was no coffin in the grave, but this room had one coffin in it. The coffin was supported by a set of dark purple bricks like a stage. In front of the stage, there was a simple memorial tablet. The writing on the memorial tablet simply said, 'A friend, Liu Rugang'.

Seeing this memorial tablet, Lu Xiaofeng's heart died within him. Whoever saw this memorial tablet would definitely believe that Liu Chengfeng, Liu Rugang was really dead.

The strange thing was, perhaps driven by the gloomy, eerie and bleak atmosphere, or perhaps Lu Xiaofeng had some weird, mysterious, almost supernatural feeling in his heart that Liu Chengfeng might jump out of the coffin at any time and be resurrected, he said, "Please open the coffin lid."

"What did you say?" Zhao Xiazi shouted in disbelief, "You want me to open the coffin lid? Whatever for?"

"Because I already told you, I want to see a dead man, not a coffin."

(Four)

When the coffin was opened, Lu Xiaofeng immediately saw Liu Chengfeng.

Although the face of a dead person is not the same as the face of a living person, in one glance Lu Xiaofeng was able to ascertain that this dead man was indeed Liu Chengfeng; not only that, he could see clearly the remaining expression Liu Chengfeng had on his face at the moment of his death, an expression of shock and fear.

"Is he the friend you are looking for?" Zhao Xiazi asked.

Lu Xiaofeng did not reply, because he already identified the fatal wound that took Liu Chengfeng's life.

The wound was located on the chest, just above the pit of the stomach, a blade wound. One fatal blade, neat and tidy.

Lu Xiaofeng was absolutely certain of this fact.

He has seen a lot of dead people, his experience in this matter was quite extensive. In fact, no one could see more clearly than he did in this kind of situation. If he was unsure of this fact, no one else could.

Yet the expression on his face was that of an extremely strange and confused one; moreover, he kept shaking his head while his mouth did not stop mumbling, "This is impossible, this is absolutely impossible." He even repeated those words over and over.

Undoubtedly Zhao Xiazi was a very patient man, if he was not patient, how could he deal with dead people? Therefore, all along he waited until Lu Xiaofeng had repeated those sentences five, six times before asking, "What's impossible? Why is it impossible?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not answer that question; he asked him instead, "Do you know who is this dead man in the coffin?" Without waiting for Zhao Xiazi to answer, he answered his own question, "He was the 'One Sword Riding the Wind' Liu Rugang. His qinggong and swordsmanship, even if can't compare with Ximen Chuixue, he was not too far behind. If you say that someone was able to stab him to death head-on, without any chance to fight back at all, even if you chop my head I won't believe you."

However, the fact in front of his eyes was exactly that.

The body inside the coffin has already fixed with burial clothes, the cut wound has also been dealt with very well. The length of this cut wound more or less was only about one cun and three fen [1 cun is approx. 1 inch, I am not sure how much 1 fen is]. Undoubtedly the blade that killed him was a very narrow blade; furthermore, it 'pierced' directly from the front, if the blade was 'chopped', the cut wound would lengthen.

That was the reason Lu Xiaofeng thought it was impossible; because on this earth, there was no one who was able to use the blade like that, able to pierce Liu Chengfeng's heart in one stab, unless this person was Liu Chengfeng's friend, whom he was very familiar with, so that Liu Chengfeng practically did not guard against him at all.

How could Liu Chengfeng have friends in a small town like this?

Lu Xiaofeng's gaze finally moved from the wound to Zhao Xiazi's face. "Do you know where he died?"

"Of course I do," Zhao Xiazi answered, "It is a very dark alley. When he died, it was already after the third watch of the night [between 11pm-1am], by that time, there was not a single lantern in that alley."

"Who was the first person to find him?"

"It's the little beggar, with whom you already talked."

"What time was his body found?"

"At that time the sky has not completely brightened yet."

"The sky has not completely brightened, why did that little beggar go that alley? What was he doing?"

"That, I am not too clear."

"Who moved the body here?"

"It was me. I personally carried the body here." Zhao Xiazi went on, "Liu Daxia was a very good man, he was also generous, he had always treated me as his friend."

He added, "Although Liu Daxia had not been here too long, he had already made quite a few good friends."

Only a good friend, one with whom he was very familiar, could take the opportunity when he did not expect at all, to stab him dead directly from the front.

Who was this good friend?

Lu Xiaofeng sighed inwardly. He asked Zhao Xiazi, "When you brought him here, wasn't the murder blade still stuck on his chest?"

"How did you know?" Zhao Xiazi appeared to be greatly astonished, "How did you know that the blade was still stuck on his body?"

"The wound is between the sixth and seventh ribs. These two ribs are

very close to each other. Once the blade went in, it would be very difficult to pull it out." Lu Xiaofeng said, "The murderer took advantage when Liu Chengfeng was careless and stabbed him dead, he must be both excited and scared; besides, he must be unsure whether this famous swordsman had really died under his blade. He would try pulling the blade with trepidation; if the first time he failed to pull the blade, he might try the second time. If the second time he still could not pull the blade, he would not try the third time."

With an exceptionally calm voice Lu Xiaofeng continued, "This kind of blade, I am sure only a coffin shop owner like you, in a very peace and quiet situation, can pull it out quite easily."

Zhao Xiazi sighed. "Until a moment ago I still did not know who you are. But now I know. You must be a very extraordinary man."

"Did it really happen like that?"

"That's right."

"Did you pull the blade out?"

"I did." Zhao Xiazi said, "I pulled it out with my own hand."

"Where's the blade?"

"Blade?" Zhao Xiazi seemed to all of a sudden forget what they had just talked about, "What blade?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

Naturally he understood people like Zhao Xiazhi very well; even more, he understood the only way to deal with this kind of people.

To deal with this kind of people, only one word is enough.

-- Money.

After a silver ingot was stuffed into Zhao Xiazhi's hand, Lu Xiaofeng asked the same question he had just asked a moment ago. Zhao Xiazhi's answer was already completely different from his response just a moment ago.

"Where's the blade?"

"Naturally I have hidden the blade."

"Where did you hide it?"

Zhao Xiazhi's originally stiff and bloodless face finally revealed a trace of a smile; at least it looked like a trace of smile, "When I want to hide something, naturally I would hide it in a place where nobody else can find it."

The coffin was supported by purple bricks, forming a low platform that looked like a sacrificial offering platform. Unexpectedly a few pieces of

bricks were moveable.

Pulling these movable bricks out, inside was a secret hiding place. If other people did not know that the platform had some moveable bricks, and they did not know which bricks were moveable, naturally it would be really difficult to find the object that was hidden inside.

Zhao Xiazi already reached into the hole in the platform; by the time he pulled his hand out, undoubtedly he would have a blade in his hand.

Lu Xiaofeng really wanted to know what kind of blade was able to stab Liu Chengfeng to his death head-on?

Yet all along Zhao Xiazi had not pulled his hand out, it was as if a viper inside the hole had suddenly grabbed his hand.

His originally pale and completely bloodless face now seemed to turn into a wretched greenish color.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at him, the pupils of his eyes gradually narrowed. "Where's the blade?"

This time unexpectedly Zhao Xiazi's reply was the same as his first answer, "Blade? What blade?"

Lu Xiaofeng was seriously thinking of giving him whack plus a heavy kick. But to his surprise Zhao Xiazi already kneeled down and cried out in distress, "I swear, I really hid the blade in here, but now the inside is empty, the blade has already gone."

Looking at his appearance, Lu Xiaofeng's palm did not continue going down, his leg did not kick out. Suppressing his anger, he asked, "Think hard, other than you, who else knew that you hid the blade in there?"

Zhao Xiazi already knocked his head against the floor, but hearing this question, he suddenly looked up, his dead eyes seemed to lit up.

"I remember, there is someone else who knew about this matter; not only he is the only one who knew, he had also seen it for himself."

Lu Xiaofeng grabbed him and lifted him up the floor, "Who's that person?" he asked in stern voice."

Gasping for breath, Zhao Xiazi said, "His surname is ..."

Zhao Xiazi did not finish this sentence, when he said the next word, his mouth was open, but no sound came out.

Because he had just opened his mouth, from the outside twenty, thirty rays of light shot in.

In this split second, by Lu Xiaofeng's estimate, there were at least twenty-three rays of light, in three different colors: green, violet, and shining like silver.

This time he was incorrect, because there was a secret projectile that was nearly transparent. The transparent one was almost invisible.

Therefore, the number of secret projectiles shooting inside the room from three different windows was not twenty-three, but twenty-four. Because one of them was transparent.

The target of these twenty-four secret projectiles was not Lu Xiaofeng, but Zhao Xiazhi.

Luckily all these secret projectiles missed their target, even the invisible projectile did not hit its target.

Because Zhao Xiazhi already crashed through the roof, he flew out.

Naturally he could not fly out on his own. He was crouching on the ground, Lu Xiaofeng grabbed him and lifted him up. It was when Lu Xiaofeng was still carrying him that the secret projectiles shot in. In this moment, where even a split second delay was unacceptable, Lu Xiaofeng already threw him out with all the strength he had, creating a large hole on the roof, and flew out from the hole.

And then Lu Xiaofeng flew out from the window where the cold rays shot in.

In that instant, the change and speed of his movement nearly exceeded the limit of human capability, it even surpassed the limit of his own physical capability.

The reason one is capable to reach success, oftentimes it is because he can unleash the superhuman willpower and survival instinct that is beyond his own physical limitation.

The same the principle applies to someone, who in the eyes of other people may die anytime and anywhere, could avoid death.

(Five)

By the time Lu Xiaofeng reached the courtyard, Zhao Xiazhi had just landed from the air into the midst of fluttering roof tiles.

From behind a pile of lumber, another flash of cold ray shot out. The target was still Zhao Xiazhi. No doubt the intention was to kill Zhao Xiazhi to shut his mouth.

While his body was still in the air, Lu Xiaofeng had picked a piece of wood. His left toes pressed on the ground, his body shot up again, the wood piece in his hand flew and struck the flash of cold ray down. With a series of light popping noise, the secret projectiles were nailed onto a wooden plank.

Zhao Xiazhi had landed on the roof, and slipped and fell back into the room via the hole on the roof.

From behind the pile of lumber, someone shouted in low voice, "Good Lu Xiaofeng, good qinggong."

"Who are you?" Lu Xiaofeng shouted back. He was going to pounce toward the pile of wood, unexpectedly a flicker of saber, like a flash of rainbow arching in the sky, as swift as an arrow, already swept toward him from the roof of the opposite building.

The saber was fast and deadly, it was meant to kill him with one chop, therefore, the saber did not leave him any room to maneuver.

Lu Xiaofeng did not shrink back to evade, instead, he charged toward the saber light head-on. Apparently the attacker was taken aback. The saber light trembled, it changed direction to sweep across Lu Xiaofeng's throat; however, the momentum was already decreasing.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly stretched out his fingers, his two fingers, and in a flash he pinched the blade of the saber, and pushed it forward. A burst of internal energy flowed from the blade down to the hilt. The hollow of the assailant's palm was jolted. His hand grip was barely loosened, the hilt of his own saber already struck the pit of his stomach. 'Crack!' two of his ribs were broken.

It was Lu Xiaofeng's consummate skill, which prestige shook the Jianghu, which had no equal throughout the world. All these changes happened in a flash. Other than Lu Xiaofeng, no other human being would be able to utilize this opportunity, where even a split second delay would be fatal, to pinch the blade of the saber.

When the assailant tumbled down from the air onto the ground, he could not help grunting like a dying beast. His saber had already moved into Lu Xiaofeng's hand, with the blade already pressed on his throat.

Actually, his saber technique and qinggong were undoubtedly first class; so Lu Xiaofeng had to admit, "I did not expect this place has such a martial art expert like you."

Lu Xiaofeng asked the assailant, who was clad in black skintight nightwalker attire and black cloth mask, "Who are you? Who sent you here? Why do you want to kill Zhao Xiazi to shut his mouth?"

The man looked at Lu Xiaofeng in shock, he was startled and scared that the pupil of his eyes shrank.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly saw on his eyes a shadow and a flash of a sword.

He was not mistaken. And his reaction was fast enough, that's why he did not die under this sword. Because he had already twisted his body around and brandished the saber.

Although his reaction was that fast, the front piece of his garment was still cut open by the cold and dense sword aura.

Amidst the flashing sword ray, he saw an old woman in violet garment, whose head was covered in white hair, but he did not see her face clearly. Because in the split second that it happened, he simply could not afford to observe clearly.

The sword pierced, he turned around and brandished the saber, the assailant whose ribs he broke already rolled away. The sword flashed again, Lu Xiaofeng was forced to step back, he withdrew toward the pile of wood. He seemed to have thought of a way to strike back, or at least a good way to escape.

But he did not strike back, neither did he escape. His countenance suddenly changed, because he suddenly discovered that the sword in

this old woman's hand was surprisingly the sword that Liu Chengfeng used to use.

This moment, the tip of the sword nearly pierced his heart. Lu Xiaofeng's situation was so dire that even if he wanted to escape, he simply could not.

A heart is, undoubtedly, a fatal organ in human's body. The strange thing is that later on Lu Xiaofeng told someone, "Fortunately, her sword was piercing my heart, or else I would definitely die."

Why?

Because at that instant, his right hand happened to be near his heart, so that although the blade of the sword had already penetrated his clothes right in front of his chest, if it went half a fen farther, Lu Xiaofeng would be finished. Too bad in that instant, the sword was unable to move even half a fen farther, because the tip of this sword was suddenly clamped by Lu Xiaofeng's two fingers.

Later someone asked him, "We know that your two fingers are like they have gods or ghosts' charms on them, so much so that those fingers seem to be completely interlinked to your mind; as soon as your mind moves, the opponent's sword will be clamped down. Because no matter how fast the sword is, it cannot possibly be faster than your mind."

This fact, nobody in Jianghu would be able to refute.

"But how come at that time your hand happened to be near your heart?"

Is it possible that you have already calculated that the opponent's sword was going to stab your heart?"

Lu Xiaofeng only laughed, he did not answer.

In this kind of things, there is simply no answer.

The instant when one is facing a matter of life and death, there are so many things that cannot be explained logically. Maybe it was the crystallization of his life-long experience and wisdom, maybe it was a split second inspiration, maybe it was no more than just plain luck.

When a swordsman has his sword clamped, it is tantamount to have his hands and feet bound; the psychological blow to him is even harder.

Yet this old woman in purple was undoubtedly a first-class swordsman, a super martial art expert. Not only her sword could move fast, her reaction was even faster. Not only her reaction was fast, her judgment was even more accurate. Therefore, as soon as Lu Xiaofeng caught her sword, she let go, while with an unbelievable speed her body immediately slipped away.

Naturally she slipped upward, the angle at which she slipped away was very unusual. In order to evade the opponent's follow-up attack, undoubtedly the angle was very effective. But it was not enough for her, undoubtedly she was a very cautious person, someone who extremely cherished her own life. Therefore, as soon as she slipped away, she made another somersault high in the air, toward an even more secure angle.

Her attire was a skintight white pomegranate long skirt, it looked exactly like a heavy hanging curtain. When a woman was wearing this kind of long skirt, usually she did not need to wear long pants on the inside. But when she was doing somersault high in the air, her long legs also flipped in the air, just like heavy waves rolling in the air.

When Lu Xiaofeng looked up, he was able to see her legs. The legs definitely did not belong to an old woman.

The legs that Lu Xiaofeng saw were snow white, slender and firm. The legs, with the head full of white hair and the face full of wrinkles definitely did not belong to the same person.

Lu Xiaofeng was a man with a very good taste, plus he was especially interested in women's legs, and he had done some research. He could even tell that this pair of legs' muscle as they moved, their firmness, their length, their beauty, was something that even Lu Xiaofeng rarely saw.

The sword in the old woman in purple's hand was Liu Chengfeng's sword, her partner's saber was very fast and accurate. Even if Lu Xiaofeng did not have any preconceived idea, he would definitely be able to tell that they must be closely related to Liu Chengfeng's death. Undoubtedly these two people had always lived in this small town. Right now, although they all came, he still had no idea about this matter.

How could he investigate this matter?

The saber-wielding man had his face covered in black cloth, the old woman's face was undoubtedly not her real face. Right now the only real thing Lu Xiaofeng saw was a pair of legs; which were definitely not an

old-lady-whose-head-was-covered-in-white-hair's legs. If he could find the owner of these legs, then he might also find the assassin who killed Liu Chengfeng.

It was Lu Xiaofeng's only clue, it was also the only thing Lu Xiaofeng could do.

What could he do?

Could it be that he had to lift the skirt of every woman in this town and look at their legs?

Honestly speaking, Lu Xiaofeng did not wish to do that either, it's just too bad that he did not have any other idea.

He'd better go find Zhao Xiazi.

But even if he was killed, Zhao Xiazi refused to say another word; he was so scared that his pants were drenched.

The city of Beijing was not built in a day, naturally investigating this kind of mysterious and odd murder case also cannot be accomplished in just one day or two. Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng had no choice but to come back and sleep.

Who would have thought that as he returned to that crappy hut, he saw a leg protruding from underneath his bed?

A filthy and black, thin leg; a leg that was covered in mud. By Lu Xiaofeng's most conservative estimate, the leg has not been washed for at least seven or eight months. However, compared to the foot at the end of the leg, the leg looked extremely clean.

That foot, practically it looked like a pile of dog poo was dumped on it.

Lu Xiaofeng smiled wryly and shook his head. He pulled a chair and sat down opposite of the bed.

The person under the bed finally crawled out slowly. A pile of hair that looked like a pile of bird's nest, covering a head that looked like bird's egg.

Lu Xiaofeng coughed lightly, "Little beggar," he called.

The little beggar jumped in fright, his head nearly hit the beam, but when he saw that it was Lu Xiaofeng, he breathed a sigh of relief. "Da Shaoye, this time you really scared the hell out of me, my soul almost left me."

Lu Xiaofeng immediately put on a very apologetic expression on his face, "Did I really scare the hell out of you?"

"Of course you did." The little beggar patted his chest, "I came so close to being scared to death by you."

"I am truly sorry," Lu Xiaofeng said, "It seems like I ought to apologize to you, and compensate you somehow."

"That is not necessary," the little beggar put on a very magnanimous air, "All you have to do is give me a bit of compensation in one area, and then I will definitely forgive you."

"A bit of compensation?" Lu Xiaofeng deliberately asked, "What kind of compensation?"

"For instance, a tiny bit of gold, a tiny bit of good wine, one or two good-looking young misses." The little beggar squinted, "Of course you also know that those things can suppress shock."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

Actually, he did not want to laugh, but he could not resist laughing. It's just that when he started laughing, he had already grabbed the front of the little beggar's clothes. And when he grabbed the front of the little beggar's clothes, the little beggar looked like a small turtle being carried away.

With a wooden face Lu Xiaofeng said, "You sneaked into my room in the middle of the night. Turning over the chest and flipping over the basket [i.e. searching everywhere] is not a big deal, but you crawled underneath my bed. What do you want?"

"I ..."

"Worse yet, you still say that I scared you and had to pay you."

With a cold laugh Lu Xiaofeng went on, "I'll say it is you who ought to pay me. Otherwise, I will definitely come up with a good way to deal with you."

The little beggar quickly broke into crying.

"I am not here to steal your things, I am a Beggar Clan's disciple, how could I steal from Lu Xiaofeng, how could I dare?" He continued with miserable scowl on his face, "Who in the world does not know that Lu Xiaofeng is a good friend of the Beggar Clan? Tens of thousands Beggar Clan brothers, from top to bottom, which one dares to attempt vainly to move a single strand of Lu Xiaofeng's hair?"

"Are you really Beggar Clan's disciple?"

"Not in the least bit fake."

Lu Xiaofeng let go, the little beggar fell down, and instantly saluted Lu Xiaofeng in a very beautiful stance. "Beggar Clan's twenty-third generation disciple Huang Xiaochong pays his respect to Lu Xiaofeng, Lu Daxia, Lu Dashu [great hero, great (younger) uncle, respectively]."

"Which hall do you belong to, which helmsman?"

"Xuanguai [lit. mysterious turtle] Hall, Wang Laoyezi [old master], under the jurisdiction of Chang Jiang [Yangzte river] district's twenty-seventh cabin. I was sent here only three years ago."

"How can Chang Jiang district's disciple be sent here?"

The little beggar sighed and said, "No matter which Clan, which Sect, there are always a few disciples with a rather bad luck."

The relationship between Beggar Clan and Lu Xiaofeng was very deep, all Beggar Clan's disciples could be considered Lu Xiaofeng's friends. And the words of a friend, Lu Xiaofeng always had little doubt.

From the mouth of this little beggar Lu Xiaofeng was able to confirm several things.

Liu Chengfeng indeed died in a dark alley, and Zhao Xiazi was indeed the one who brought him back. At that time the murder weapon was indeed still stuck on Liu Chengfeng's dead body.

Question is –

"But the first person who discovered Liu Daye's dead body was not me." The little beggar spoke with a very convincing tone, "People in our line of work, although we love to roam to the east and stroll to the west in the middle of the night, but when I got to that dark alley that night, there were at least two people ahead of me."

"Oh?"

"I wasn't going to go to that alley, it was because I heard Liu Daye's miserable cry that I rushed there."

"And when you got there, you saw two people already there?"

"Right."

"What kind of people?"

"It was in the depth of the night, I could not see their faces clearly, plus as soon as they saw me, they quickly ran away." The little beggar went on, "But I can tell that those two people, one was a man, the other a woman."

"One man and one woman?"

Lu Xiaofeng immediately thought about the masked assassin and the woman who masqueraded as an old woman but have a pair of nice legs whom he came across at Zhao Xiazi's rear courtyard.

(Six)

The room was of a very simple construction, the furnishing was only a broken-down wooden table which paint has peeled off long ago, the bed was a worn out bed.

All of these were not a big deal. The big deal was that in the room there was no friend, on the table there was no wine, and on the bed there was one person less.

In this kind of room, Lu Xiaofeng actually did not want to stay, even more, he would definitely not want to sleep on the bed.

But right now Lu Xiaofeng has already lay on the bed. Liu Chengfeng was his friend. Liu Chengfeng's death was indeed too strange.

Sleeping so far away in a desolate little town also seemed to be unspeakably odd.

If Lu Xiaofeng did not care of even these kinds of things, what other things would he care?

If Lu Xiaofeng did not care of even these kinds of things, then Lu Xiaofeng would not be Lu Xiaofeng either.

To deal with this matter, he had to think about a lot of other things first.

Up to now, all the clues that Lu Xiaofeng had come from the little beggar and Zhao Xiazi. These two did not seem to lie, yet the strange thing was, there seemed to be a contradiction between the two.

But what was the contradiction? Lu Xiaofeng was unable to explain. There are a lot of things he was unable to understand, he could not even see the shadow, he could not even see the door.

It was the moment where he wanted his head to be as big as three heads when he suddenly heard a strange noise.

His heart suddenly jumped.

Everyone knew that Lu Xiaofeng was by no means a person who could be easily excited, but right now his heart was thumping really wild.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart had always been beating, it's just that right now the beating of his heart was a lot faster than usual. Because he suddenly heard someone else's heart beating, 'thump, thump, thump'; on top of that, he also heard a light labored breathing, and the noise came from outside the thin wooden door, and the noise was a very seductive female voice.

More importantly, Lu Xiaofeng immediately recognized the woman making this sound was the slim-waisted, slender-legged lady boss, the lady boss who, when she walked on the street, her whole body was twisting and turning like a snake.

She was rushing from across the courtyard, she ran onto the door with elevated heartrate and heavy, labored breathing.

Second watch of the night [between 9-11pm] she ran toward the room of an unknown traveler, what did she want? Lu Xiaofeng did not even dare to think about.

As a traveler who went far from home, if he thought too much about this kind of matter all night long, how could he get some sleep? Tonight naturally Lu Xiaofeng would not get any sleep, because the lady boss has already pushed the door and came in.

The door was not bolted, that's why the lady boss was able to push the door and walk in. But as she came in, she closed the door and bolted it.

Lu Xiaofeng lay in bed like a dead man, he did not move at all. But his heart was moved.

A healthy, normal man, a solitary, lonely traveler, if in this situation he was able to prevent his heart from being moved, then he was really dead.

Lu Xiaofeng did not move, only because he wanted to see what this charming, flirtatious lady boss would do by coming here in the dead of the night.

Could it be that she came to search his luggage? Was it to kill him? Or was it to seduce him?

As a man, naturally Lu Xiaofeng was hoping that the reason she came here was the last one.

This was man's vanity and pride. It's possible to any man to entertain such hope.

Fortunately, Lu Xiaofeng also entertained different idea.

If this crafty lady boss was coming to kill him, at least he would get the proof that she was related to Liu Chengfeng's murder case; in which case the scope of Lu Xiaofeng's investigation could be narrowed somewhat.

Unfortunately, the lady boss did not even have the slightest idea of killing him.

The lantern in the room had already been extinguished. From outside the window, there was a lantern light of unknown origin, dimly illuminated the lady boss' waist and her pair of slender legs, the curves of the legs were clearly visible under the thin and soft long gown.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly opened his mouth, "You should know where the lantern is, go light it."

The lady boss seemed surprised, her pair of snow-white hands went up to gently pat her ample breasts.

"You scared me to death, you really scared me out of my skin." She asked Lu Xiaofeng, "Isn't this very good? Why do you want me to light the lantern?"

It was Lu Xiaofeng's answer that would really scare most women out of their skin, "Because I want to see your legs," he said.

The lady boss giggled. "What's so good about my legs? I won't show it to you."

Unexpectedly Lu Xiaofeng put on an act like a spoiled brat, "I like to see, I want to see, I cannot not see it."

The lady boss sighed, "Ay, you. You are really annoying; do you know that?" Although her mouth said those words, yet the lantern on the broken-down wooden table was lit by her.

The lady boss turned her body that it faced the light, and then she

threw her charming and fluid glance toward Lu Xiaofeng, "Will this do?"

"Not enough."

"Not enough?" the lady boss asked, "Why not enough?"

"Because now I see only your skirt, I haven't seen your legs."

"What do you want?" the lady boss' fluid glance seemed to ripple, "Could it be that you want me to pull up my skirt?"

"Exactly right," Lu Xiaofeng said with malicious smile, "That's exactly what I have in mind."

With fine and white teeth the lady boss bit her lower lip gently, "Ay, you; you are indeed my destined love [in opera]."

If a woman calls you her destined love, then you may rest assure that womenfolk definitely will not refuse a request from a destined love. Therefore, very soon Lu Xiaofeng was able to see the lady boss' legs.

This pair of legs did not give anybody any reason to complain; even the most picky man ought to feel very satisfied.

However, he was sighing in his heart, so much so that his disappointment showed on his face.

Because this pair of legs was not the one he wanted to see.

The one he wanted to see was the pair of legs that was revealed under the flipping purple skirt, the one with sturdy muscles, the one that looked supple and flexible, the one full of youthful vitality.

Although the lady boss' legs looked fine and delicate, the muscles were already not as tight; although they could still arouse desire in a man's heart, they already lacked firmness.

Lu Xiaofeng did not hide his disappointment very well, but the lady boss did not pay any attention; she merely asked in a sultry voice, "And now what do you want me to do?"

To her surprise, Lu Xiaofeng closed his eyes, "And now I want you to put your skirt on, blow out the lamp on the table, and with your two big, fat legs, get out of here."

The lady boss was furious, this time she was really enraged, she was so angry that she wanted to strangle this vile moustache to his death. "What do you mean?" she screamed her question toward Lu Xiaofeng.

"I believe I have already made my meaning very clear just now," Lu Xiaofeng flatly said, "And I believe you have heard it very clearly."

Lu Xiaofeng thought that she would be so angry that perhaps she would pounce on him and beat him several times, or bite him several times.

But he did not care.

Dealing with a crazy woman, Mr. Lu Xiaofeng knew at least a hundred ways.

The unthinkable thing was: not only our lady boss did not go crazy, she broke into giggles instead.

"Ay, you! You are indeed not a good thing, you are basically not a human being." It sounded as if she was laughing in glee, "Fortunately I still have a way to deal with a man who is really not a man like you."

"Oh?"

"I can guarantee that if you let me walk out of that door today, you will regret it for the rest of your life."

Surprisingly, there was not the least bit of anger in her voice. Even a 'veteran of a hundred battles' like Lu Xiaofeng could not help thinking that it was very strange. Therefore, he could not resist asking, "Are you telling me that if I do not keep you here tonight, I will regret it for the rest of my life?"

The lady boss smiled sweetly, revealing a row of fine, white teeth, "I believe I have already made my meaning very clear just now," she said, "And I believe you have heard it very clearly."

"Alright, just consider I lose this time." He even went as far as raising both hands high in the air, "And now, can you tell me why I would regret

it for the rest of my life?"

"Because I am the only one who can tell you how your friend Liu Chengfeng died."

This sentence was like a whip; it was as if Lu Xiaofeng was being whipped. He sprang up from the bed and asked, "You know who killed him?"

"I think I probably know a little."

Lu Xiaofeng stiffened, but his voice turned gentler, "In that case, can you tell me now?"

"Of course I can, you are my destined love, no matter what you want me to do, I'll do it," the lady boss said, "But it is only proper if you'll let me have you do something first."

"What is it?"

The lady boss looked straight at him, softly but flatly she said, "Take off your pants and let me look at your legs."

Lu Xiaofeng stared blankly, as if he was so terrified that he turned silly. But suddenly he grinned from ear to ear, "It's so easy," he smiled delightedly, "What could be easier in the world than a woman asking a man to take off his pants? As long as I can make you happy, whatever you want me to take off, I don't care."

He did not lie. Before he even finished speaking, his pants had already left his legs.

"And now what do you want me to do?"

The lady boss' fluid glance seemed to ripple again, "And now I want you to throw away your pants, blow out the lamp on the table, and with your two small, thin legs, come over here and hug me."

In order to do something, much less that something simply must be done, one always has to pay a small price.

In order to do something for a real friend, whatever price one has to pay, it is always worth it.

Lu Xiaofeng has always been a man of principle, and that was his principle.

Therefore, the light went out.

(Seven)

One man one woman, one small room, one bed. After the light went out, there were so many things could happen.

One man one woman, one small room, one bed. After the light went out, it is also possible that nothing happened.

What has actually happened? After all these things, anything that happened, other than these two people, who would know?

The only thing that we can be sure is that Lu Xiaofeng definitely asked the lady boss, "How did you know who killed Liu Chengfeng?"

"Because in this small town of ours, where even the birds do not lay eggs, only one person has the capability to kill him."

Naturally this answer needed some explanation. The lady boss' explanation was that the town of Huangshi was an extremely desolate, out-of-the-way small town. Since the legend that said that there were gold buried somewhere in the vicinity of this town was confirmed to be just a rumor, even regular travelers no longer journey pass this town, because this town was basically not located on a major trading route.

The inhabitants of this town were born here and grew roots here, they were already accustomed to a life of poverty, yet a very peaceful and quiet life. They already lost their ability to adapt to a competitive and bustling life in the world outside their small town.

The lady boss said, "Take that dead fatty of our family for example; he clings obstinately to this small grocery store, which has already been in his family for several generations. If right now you want him to move out to earn fistful after fistful of silver, he won't have the guts to do it." She went on, "As soon as he leaves this town for a single step, his legs will turn weak."

Most other people in this town were also like that. They lived in poverty,

but the peaceful and quiet life had completely stripped them off of the will to fight, and they had absolutely no vanity.

Because they practically did not know what kind of sensual splendor the people on the outside were enjoying.

These people had already distanced themselves from the world as far back as a hundred of years ago, they lived and took root in this small town, every family understood each other, just like a man understands himself. "Only one person is an exception," the lady boss said, "In our town, he is the only exception."

"Who is this person?"

"His surname is Sha, almost nobody remembers his given name, because everybody simply calls him Sha Dahu." [Dahu means great family/rich family/big landlord, etc.]

"Sha Dahu? Why would everybody call him Sha Dahu?" Lu Xiaofeng asked the lady boss.

"Even several fresh water wells in the town of Huangshi belong to him; if people don't call him Sha Dahu, what should we call him?"

"Why would this Sha Dahu want to kill Liu Chengfeng?"

"I did not say that he wanted to kill Liu Chengfeng," the lady boss said, "I just said that if anybody in the town of Huangshi is able to kill Liu Chengfeng, this person must be Sha Dahu."

"Why?"

"Because I also know that Liu Daye [big master] was a first class martial art master of Jianghu, while our people here, as soon as we saw other people moving their sabers, they would pee in their pants and become the grandsons of a turtle."

The lady boss went on, "Other than big boss Sha, nobody in the town of Huangshi dares to move a single strand of Liu Daye's hair." She added for emphasis, "Other than big boss Sha, nobody has that kind of ability either."

"What ability does he have?"

"Actually, he himself does not have any bird egg ability, what he has is no more than a belly full of sh1t."

The lady boss had brought an earthen jar of wine along, which she now drank with Lu Xiaofeng. No doubt it was one of the most delightful things in the world. Therefore, this lady boss of ours, who had a pair of white hands and a pair of long legs plus an amorous heart, found it hard not to get drunk even if she did not want to. Hence the reason now she started to talk a little nonsense.

"It's just that our Big Boss Sha is a bit stronger than those turtle grandsons," the lady boss said, "Because other than a belly full of sh1t, he also has a house full of gold, silver, pearls and jewels."

"What does it have to do with Liu Chengfeng's death?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

The lady boss grabbed Lu Xiaofeng's neck and patted his cheek just like patting a little child's cheek.

"Xiao Shaoye [little young master], do you know that there are a lot of people who are like fly? When they see sh1t, they disregard their own lives and immediately fly over." Her eyes narrowed, "Gold, silver, pearls and jewels are their sh1t."

"So what kind of people are these flies?"

"The flies are some good-for-nothing, men who are not humans." The lady boss said, "Robbers, fugitives, murderer, scoundrels, serial rapists, and animals who sell their friends. They were on the run and had nowhere else to go, hence they turn into flies, buzzing over a large pile of sh1t. Naturally, the farther this pile of sh1t is the better."

She drank the last mouthful of wine from the earthen jar, "The pile of sh1t in this town of Huangshi is naturally the farthest."

Lu Xiaofeng knew that very soon this woman would become a drunken female cat, because he knew that the wine in that earthen jar was a strong wine; therefore, he took advantage to ask a few more questions before she got drunk.

"Are you saying that among these flies, there are some first-class martial art masters?"

"Probably there are."

"Could it be that among these robbers and murderers who seek shelter under Sha Dahu you recognize some people who can kill Liu Chengfeng?"

"I don't know either." The lady boss' eyes already closed, "If you want to know, why don't you go and see it for yourself?"

Finished speaking that sentence, the lady boss' eyes would not open anymore, she was totally drunk, and had become a sleeping woman that Lu Xiaofeng had no way of waking her up.

Other than going straight to Sha Dahu, he had no other way at all.

[1] 1 qian is approx. 1/10 of a tael, or 5 grams (of silver). 1 diao is a string of 100 coins, not sure the equivalent value.

Chapter 4 – The killer in the rich family's[1] household

Naturally Sha Dahu's original name was not 'Dahu' [see footnote], it's just that his surname was really 'Sha'; his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and all his ancestors were surnamed 'Sha', furthermore, they were all called 'Sha Dahu'.

Speaking about their family, practically no other appellation is more appropriate than 'Dahu'.

Sha Man'ge, alias[2] Guan Yun, was a studious scholar, by the age of thirteen he entered school, by the age of seventeen he passed the provincial level of imperial exam, by the age of eighteen he was one of the leading finalists in the Capital Imperial Examination, entered Hanlin [Imperial Academy]. He was amiable, and was a romantic young man; even if he did not want to be a distinguished man, he simply could not. But being distinguished has its own price. [Translator's note: Additional info on Hanlin Academy was provided by Lu DongBin.]

Being distinguished he was frivolous, being distinguished he became indifferent, being distinguished led him to poverty, being distinguished led to untimely death.

Why would a talented, peerless literary talent have the heart of blowing away his discretion and exchanging it with an empty reputation?

It's just the price of being distinguished.

Throughout the ages, distinguish persons knew that gains and losses

are insignificant, so why would they want to achieve it? So what if they fail? So what if they live? So what if they die? A tiny mustard seed is no different than the world, an instant is no different than an eternity.

Sha Man'ge's outstanding career has taken its toll, their entire Sha family was banished forever to the border area as a penal sentence, they became refugees.

But as refugees, they lived an aristocratic life in the town of Huangshi.

Because Sha Man'ge was an intellectual. Less than a year after his arrival in the town of Huangshi, he managed to unearth gold in a mine on the nearby mountain.

In the world, there is nothing more real, more valuable than gold.

People of the lower class of society, women and children, rough men and peasants, may not know pearl, agate, emerald, jasper, literary treasure, famous painting, ancient jade sculpture, and fine china, but what about gold?

If there is anyone in the world who does not know the value of gold, that would be strange indeed.

Ever since the Sha family struck a fortune, the town of Huangshi and its vicinity started to see gold rush, people who wanted to get rich flocked from four sides, eight directions. Overnight the town of Huangshi became prosperous.

Too bad in the booming economy this town experience did not last long. Because other than Sha Dahu, the number of people who manage to find gold was pathetically low.

Most people left in disappointment. Only Sha Dahu was still Sha Dahu. Huangshi town also remained as depressing as ever.

(Two)

Lu Xiaofeng visited Sha Dahu on the second day after his arrival in the town of Huangshi. At that moment Sha Dahu was drinking his first cup of wine of the day. During lunch, he usually drank a relatively softer wine.

That particular day, he was drinking a good home brewed wine shipped from far away Shaoxing [prefecture, Zhejiang]. This kind of wine is easy to enter the mouth, but the effect afterwards was quite powerful. Accompanying him, sitting right next to him was a distinguished guest, one Mr. Sun. It was said that he was an ex-county head magistrate, a seemingly polite, refined, and gentle scholar.

The guard on duty at the gate, whose job was to announce the incoming guest and guard the courtyard, that day, was Yang Wu [lit. Yang the fifth].

Sha Dahu had a wine cup in one hand, and a pair of chopstick in the other; his eyes were fixed on the feet of a 'wind chicken' dish in front of him. With a cold voice he asked Yang Wu, "Do you know that when I am eating, I don't want to see any visitor?"

"I know."

"Then why haven't you told that man outside to get the hell out of here?"

"Actually, not only I wanted him to get the hell out of here, I also wanted to grab his neck and throw him out," Yang Wu said.

"And why haven't you done so?"

"Because I am not able to throw this man out." Yang Wu said, "He did not throw me out, I am already very happy."

Sha Dahu turned his head around, with narrowed eyes he looked at him and said, "I have always thought that you are a man with guts, how could you turn into such a coward?"

In front of his boss, Yang Wu did not seem to be too polite. "I am not a coward at all," he said, "I just don't want to provoke that man, that's all."

Mr. Sun interrupted, "What kind of person is that gentleman, actually?"

With a deliberate coldness Yang Wu replied, "Actually, there is nothing extraordinary about that man, he is only the four-eyebrowed Lu Xiaofeng."

Sha Dahu's arrogance has always been big, annoyingly big; but as soon as he heard the three characters Lu Xiao Feng, instantly he seemed to

change into another person.

This three-character name in itself seemed to have a particularly strong twisting power.

Lu Xiaofeng himself also understood this fact. Therefore, although he was standing outside the door, waiting for half a day, he was still confident that when Sha Dahu heard his name, he would definitely come out personally to welcome him, and would use the best wine and dishes to entertain him, he would even have the best looking people to accompany him.

To this fact, he was very confident.

Once, when he was drunk, he asked one of his good friends; he asked Honest Monk, "Do you know what kind of person I am?"

Without waiting for Honest Monk, he answered his own question, "I am an expert in swindling my food and drink; just by using my name, I can eat anywhere in the world."

Honest Monk laughed and said, "This time you have spoken honest words."

Good wine, good dishes had already been set on the table; sure enough, the extremely arrogant Big Boss Sha came out personally to greet and lead him in, the reception hall was already packed with people. Who would want to miss the opportunity to see a man like Lu Xiaofeng?

Deeply apologetic, Sha Dahu toasted Lu Xiaofeng, "Lu Xiong [brother, generic term], look at this place. Don't you think it looks like a food market?"

"It is, kind of."

Sha Dahu roared in laughter, "Actually, this is a quiet place in the wilderness, culturally, we are not people with compass and set square. But as everyone heard that Lu Xiaofeng has arrived, the one who can pinch blades with his two fingers, the one with four eyebrows, everybody wanted to see what kind of man this Lu Xiaofeng is. I cannot stop them."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed theatrically, "Indeed, it can't be helped. Who told me to be such a famous person?" Actually, he did not show the least bit of modesty at all. "A celebrity oftentimes has to encounter this kind of situation."

Everybody laughed. Except one, a man who wore a dark blue scholar gown, who looked like a settled guest of this house[3], a smallish middle-aged man. Although his face was smiling, his eyes were completely devoid of any laughter, even the laughter on his face looked strained.

Fortunately Lu Xiaofeng had not noticed him, he only laughed and said to Sha Dahu, "My poverty, my laziness, are very well-known; I am sure you also know about it."

"I have heard."

"Then why didn't you ask me, why would a man like me acted like a

mule, foolishly taking thousands of li journey, rolling and crawling to reach this place?"

With a rueful sigh Sha Dahu said, "This place is really getting poorer and poorer, and the number people coming to live here is getting fewer and fewer." He went on, "Such a big celebrity like Lu Xiaofeng unexpectedly can come here, even in our dream we would not expect that."

Just like Lu Xiaofeng, a mischievous smile suddenly appeared on his originally very dignified 'guo' [country] shaped face [i.e. square face], "Fortunately even when I am not dreaming I can still see it."

Lu Xiaofeng raised his four eyebrows, "You really know?"

"Really."

"So what do you know?"

"I know that you come here for your friend's sake, your friend was very unfortunate and met his demise in this place."

"What you know is indeed not a few."

"Although this place is poor, I am not." Sha Dahu said, "A rich man like me, there are always a lot of people sneakily come to me to report about a lot of things." His laughter was unusually cheerful, "Rich people are like famous people, no matter what, we always do things a bit more conveniently than other people."

Indeed this fact cannot be refuted.

Whenever Lu Xiaofeng heard something reasonable, he always showed admiration, "It appears that you indeed have a bit learning."

Sha Dahu laughed aloud, "I am afraid my learning is indeed no more than just a bit." Similarly, he did not show the least bit of modesty at all.

"Other than that, what else do you know?" Lu Xiaofeng asked this man, who seemingly had multiple personalities. "Do you know that I come to you for the sake of a blade?"

"That kind of thing, how could I not know?" Sha Dahu deliberately spoke in cold and indifferent manner, "How could there be anything happening in this small town that I do not know about?"

Lu Xiaofeng fixed his gaze at his face; with the same cold and indifferent tone he said, "In that case, you must also know who those two people are."

"Two people?" Sha Dahu knitted his brows, "What kind of two people?"

"You don't know the two people I am talking about?"

"How could I know?" Sha Dahu said, "Although this place is small, the people are not a few, how could I know which two people you are talking about?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed; he shook his head and said, "Turns out there are still things in this small town that you don't know about."

This sentence was a bit confusing.

He said that he was looking for two people, yet he did not mention anything about these two people's name, surname, and origin; neither did he mention their stature and appearance. If there was anybody who understood what he was talking about, now that would be strange indeed.

Yet he obviously said those things. Perhaps only Mr. Lu Xiaofeng could say such thing.

He was sure Sha Dahu would be angry; Mr. Lu's words often made people die of anger, even Honest Monk, who possessed such self-restraint, nearly died of anger in the gutter because of him, let alone such a big boss like Sha Dahu.

"What kind of two people are you looking for, actually?" suppressing his anger, Sha Dahu asked Lu Xiaofeng.

"It's a man and a woman."

"So you are looking for a man and a woman? Wonderful! Really wonderful!"

Sha Dahu laughed angrily, "It so happens that in this world half of the people are men, the other half are women and you said you are looking for a man and a woman. Tell me, isn't that a coincidence or what?"

He was angry, but Lu Xiaofeng was not angry. Mr. Lu was always able to make people angry, but he would not get angry himself.

Looking at his delighted expression, Sha Dahu, who was originally very angry, suddenly laughed, "Turns out I have fallen into your trap."

"You have fallen into what trap?"

"You deliberately wanted to make me angry, and unexpectedly I really got angry." Sha Dahu said, "I simply looked like a fool."

In reality, he did not like a fool at all, Lu Xiaofeng made him angry for no rhyme or reason.

Ever since these two men met, none of each sentence they said made any sense. Just like two martial art masters of wulin exchanging blows, each one trying to outdo the other. "I can see clearly that you are just like me, a very competitive person." Sha Dahu said, "I always like this kind of man."

"Too bad you have grown beard," Lu Xiaofeng deliberately sighed, "You probably also know that Mr. Lu has always liked beautiful women."

This time Big Boss Sha did not get angry. Oftentimes anger is not a good thing, especially anger that brings adverse effect to one's health.

Big bosses usually take a good care of their bodies. Therefore, he asked Lu Xiaofeng again, "Those man and woman that you are looking for, is there anything in particular that is different than other people?"

"The man is very good at using blade."

Big Boss Sha laughed, "Our family's cook is also very good at using blade." [Translator's note: in Chinese, the word 'dao' can mean saber, blade, knife, single-edge sword, etc. which can be difficult to transfer into English.]

"He uses blade to slice meat, the slices are thinner than paper." He then asked Lu Xiaofeng deliberately, "Are you looking for my cook?"

Naturally Lu Xiaofeng would not get angry; he asked in return, "Can your cook kill people?"

"I only know that he can only slice meat."

"What kind of meat?"

"Pork, beed, mutton, dog meat, mule meat, horse meat, fish, crane, goose, rabbit, deep pool meat [潭子, I don't know what it is]; he can slice any meat, he has even sliced tiger meat." Sha Dahu continued, "Only one kind of meat he does not slice."

"Human meat?"

"You got it." Sha Dahu was still laughing, "Human meat is sour, more sour than horse meat, I definitely won't allow my cook to slice human meat."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed again, "How could people who have never eaten human flesh know that human meat is sour? So strange."

Sha Dahu did not pay him any attention; otherwise he would get angry again.

Other people trying to make you mad, but you did not get mad, that is a lofty quality. If as a big boss one does not have one or two lofty qualities, how could one succeed in his role as a big boss?

"So the man is adept in using blade, how about the woman?" he asked.

"The woman is even more strange." Lu Xiaofeng said, "Her head is covered in completely white hair, just like a sixty, seventy-year old woman. But her legs were like sixteen, seventeen-year old young woman."

Such a pair of legs, if someone can forget it as soon as he sees it, that person must not be a man.

Not to be able to see it, undoubtedly Big Boss Sha was filled with regret. Although he was starting to get old, he was, after all, still a man. The older a man gets, the more he loves to see women's legs. Even if he could just take a glance, it was all right.

Big Boss Sha sighed, while reviewing in his mind all the beautiful legs he had seen in his life one by one. It was not until he felt that he was a bit younger again that he asked, "Did you see her face?"

"I did not." At that time Lu Xiaofeng practically did not have any chance to see her face. Besides, even if he did, it would be useless, since the hair was fake, the face could also be altered. The sky was getting darker, life and death was in between breaths.

Naturally it was not that Big Boss Sha did not understand this kind of circumstances, yet he still had to ask, "Why didn't you just look at her face?"

"Because I am a man," Lu Xiaofeng said drily, "A man seeing that kind of pair of legs, who would have time to look at her face?"

The question did not make any sense, the respond definitely did; the whole building roared into laughter.

"Now I understand your trouble," he laughed aloud and said, "Practically you won't find this woman, unless you lift up the skirt of every woman in this place and take a look."

Lu Xiaofeng did not deny, on the contrary, lowering his voice, he said in deadpan manner, "To tell you the truth, I was thinking the same thing."

"Who wouldn't?" Sha Dahu also deliberately lowered his voice, "If you are really going to do it, you simply must tell me, so that I can follow you and take a look as well."

Even after these two talked for half a day, nobody knew whether they were bickering, or whether it was a battle of wits?

The Four-Eyebrowed Lu Xiaofeng has appeared, it seemed that there is nothing really special about him. The people crowding the main hall starting to feel that there was not much point for them to stay, hence one by one they slipped away.

Originally the scholar wearing blue cotton gown could not laugh, and now naturally he could not stay either.

Suddenly in a loud voice Lu Xiaofeng said, "Jin Laoqi [lit. old Jin (gold) the seventh], other people may leave, you must not leave."

Who was Jin Laoqi? Nobody knew whom he was calling. Therefore, without exception, everybody was startled.

When one is suddenly startled, one would definitely halt his step. Everybody was looking around at everybody else, they wanted to know whom this Lu Xiaofeng, a gentleman with great reputation, was calling? Why did he call him?

The scholar was no exception. Unfortunately, by now everybody was able to see that the person Lu Xiaofeng was calling was indeed himself.

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes were already fixed on him like nails, even he himself could feel it. Therefore, suppressing his emotion, he asked, "Lu Daxia [great hero], who do you call?"

"I am not a great hero, just like you are not a scholar." Lu Xiaofeng said, "The one I called was precisely the only Jianghu character who can 'trespass a thousand houses in one night, rob a hundred mansions in one day', Jin Qiliang [lit. seven taels]."

"I don't know that man."

"You don't know that man, but I do." Lu Xiaofeng said, "You are Jin Qiliang, Jin Qiliang is precisely you."

[1] Reminder: Dahu of Sha Dahu's name [see Chapter 3] means great family *rich family* large landlord.

[2] Alias – courtesy or style name traditionally given to males aged 20 in dynastic China.

[3] When translating Jin Yong's Deer and Cauldron, I had the following note: I seem to remember reading about rich families in ancient China who had guests staying in their homes for an extended period of times. Interestingly, Bing Translator gives this definition: protégés of the powerful who stay with their benefactors like parasites.

Chapter 5 – Seven taels of cotton, one sheet of mask.

(One)

The name Jin Qiliang was not without origin. Of course it was not his real name, but it was his nickname.

Oftentimes people of Jianghu have nicknames. Original names may be dog fart and make no sense, but nicknames have to have a bit of justification.

Lu Xiaofeng was neither little nor a phoenix [reminder: Xiao Feng means little phoenix], he did not even know what a phoenix or a phoenix's wife [凰 – huang] look like, since has never seen them.

Naturally Ximen Chuixue [reminder: chui xue means blowing snow] did not go around and blow snow either. The only thing Li Xunhuan [xun huan means searching happiness] could find was usually trouble. Li Huai [huai means bad/spoiled] was not bad at all. Between Hu Tiehua [tie hua means iron/metal flower] and a real metal flower, even using eight bamboo poles, one will not find the least bit of relationship.

But Sha Dahu was Sha 'Rich Family' [see Chapter 4], Little Beggar was a little beggar, Wangbadan [lit. turtle egg, *i.e.* b@stard, s.o.b.] was definitely not a stinky fish.

In that case, how did other people call Jin Qiliang seven taels of gold [see Chapter 4]?

Jin Qiliang's original name was Jin Mantang ['fill the hall', *i.e.* fullhouse, sell-out, jam-packed], if one is able to fill a large hall [tang] with a pile of gold [jin], that would be vey delightful.

Too bad the gold in his house cannot fill even a chamber pot.

Therefore, since he was little he learned martial art. His favorite was qinggong and technique to jump vertically upward.

After his qinggong was trained well, he was able to jump to high places unhindered, taking other people's belongings and their women as easy as picking stuff from his own pocket. It was more delightful than filling the hall with gold.

Just because since childhood he had this kind of 'grand ambition', he trained his qinggong really well, so much so that people in Jianghu said that if Jin Mantang unleashed the full extent of his qinggong, he was able to land on the ground noiselessly, as light as flying cotton wadding, just like seven tael-cotton [1 tael is approx. 50 grams]. Hence other people called him Jin Qiliang.

Staturewise, Jin Qiliang did not look tall or impressive, he look delicate, almost pretty, with white teeth and red lips, ever since he was little he attracted a lot of people's affection. Otherwise, there would not be that many big robbers and 'flying thief' [burglar who gains entrance by scaling walls] taught him tricks and secrets of qinggong.

How could this old scholar with yellow face and emaciated body be Jin Qiliang? Could it be that Lu Xiaofeng misidentified him?

"I can't possibly misidentified you," Lu Xiaofeng said, "You are wearing a human skin mask on your face, although it is not a bad craftsmanship at all, at least it costs you several hundred taels of silver, but don't you ever think that you could deceive me." He walked over.

The scholar stared at him, suddenly the old man sighed, "Lu Xiaofeng, I wonder, until today, you haven't died yet. Could it be that you really won't die forever?" Jin Qiliang was definitely a smart man.

A smart man knew that if he could not deceive someone, he would not continue his deceit. He even took off the mask covering his face.

"Lu Xiaofeng, you have the ability to recognize me; I have nothing to say." Jin Qiliang said, "But you said that this human-skin mask cost me several hundred taels of silver, you are just a bit too far off."

"Oh?"

Jin Qiliang gently caressed the cicada's wing thin skin mask, as gentle and tender as an old man gently caressing a young woman.

"This is a 'Red Pavilion' genuine article, I traded a Wu Daozi painting and a four-chi [approx. four feet] tall coral for this." He said, "Those are at least worth several thousand taels."

"Really?"

"Of course it's real."

All four of Lu Xiaofeng's eyebrows drooped down, he looked as if he was about to cry. "If you really traded in those two things for this mask of yours, you might as well hurry up and hang yourself."

"Why?" Jin Qiliang urgently asked, "Are you saying that this mask is a fake?"

"If this mask is not a fake, I will go and hang myself." Lu Xiaofeng said, "If in the evening you are wearing a Red Pavilion mask, I am afraid even the gods would find it difficult to recognize you."

Hongge ['Red Pavilion'] was Zhu Ting's alias. Zhu Ting was a very, very extraordinary person, and he was also an old friend of Lu Xiaofeng.

I emphasized this matter, because it is a very important crucial point in this story.

(Two)

And now Jin Qiliang's face also looked like he was about to cry. Being swindled sometimes feels like eating sh1t; since the sh1t has already entered the belly, how could he vomit it up?

He wanted to cry, yet he could not cry, he wanted to throw up, yet he could not throw up, Jin Qiliang only felt his mouth dry and stinky.

With a very sympathetic look Lu Xiaofeng stared at him, with a very

warm hand he patted his shoulder, "Don't be angry, and don't feel sad either; as long as you are willing to tell me the truth, I will definitely get you a genuine 'Hongge'."

"If you want me to tell you who that woman is, you are asking the wrong person," Jin Qiliang said, "Practically I never look at women's legs."

"I know you don't!" Lu Xiaofeng said, "You always prefer to look at men."

The tone of his voice was not condescending at all. In some periods of history, men liked men and women like women was a very common occurrence. Especially in time of peace and prosperity, within the upper class of scholar officials society, this kind of matter was even more widespread.

Jin Qiliang's attitude suddenly changed. Hongge's genuine article did not move his heart, but Lu Xiaofeng's view on this matter has moved him, it took away his feeling of inferiority, while at the time awakened an unspeakable feeling in his heart that he had met an intimate friend.

This kind of feeling was very difficult to conceal, naturally Lu Xiaofeng was able to see it right away; therefore, he immediately asked, "I believe you know this man Liu Chengfeng?"

"I do." Jin Qiliang said, "He came here last year, and he also died here."

"How did he die?"

"He was stabbed to death in a dark alley." Jin Qiliang's expression

suddenly became grim, "Just like when I stabbed Eighth Master Tian's grandson to death in a dark alley, there was no reason behind it."

"Was it because you killed Young Master Tian that you fled to this place?"

"After killing someone that I must not kill, my only option is to flee." Jin Qiliang sadly said, "Fugitive's days are not easy, inevitably there will be a day the avenger of blood will catch up with me."

"Why?"

"After murdering a man, my heart is in turmoil, it's hard to avoid leaving behind some trails." Jin Qiliang said, "It doesn't matter how high your qinggong is, it doesn't matter how fast you can run, as long as there is a little bit of trail, others will be able to find you."

"The person who killed Liu Chengfeng, what kind of trail did he leave?"

"He left a blade." Jin Qiliang said, "A very unique blade."

In Jianghu people's eyes, a blade is a blade, just like a man is a man. Any man can be killed, any blade can kill a man. Men use a blade, blade kills a man, a man is killed. Just like chicken produce eggs, eggs produce chicken, in turn chicken produce other eggs; it's just natural. Just like one is one, two is two, three is three; it's that simple.

Jianghu's logic was just as simple. If they say that a blade was very unique, that the blade must be very special indeed.

Jin Qiliang was a hundred per cent Jianghu man. Since he said so, it was only natural that Lu Xiaofeng asked him, "What's so special about the blade?"

Jin Qiliang's answer was very strange, his answer did not sound like something a Jianghu man would say. "Practically that blade is not a blade," he said.

Lu Xiaofeng was not deaf, his mind was also very clear; to this day, he had not even drunk a drop of wine. He heard every word of it, not a single word was missed.

"Practically that blade is not a blade." That was what Jin Qiliang had said.

Jin Qiliang did not lie at all, that blade indeed could not be considered a 'saber' [reminder: in Chinese, the word 'dao' can be translated as blade, knife, dagger, single-edged sword, and saber], it was no more than a dagger. Not only the design was very intricate, undoubtedly the value was extremely high.

The hilt was carved from a genuine elephant trunk, in the shape of a naked woman, the curves were exquisite, very vivid and lifelike. If you stare at her, her eyes seemed to stare back at you with desire, as if she was going to throw herself into your embrace.

The color of ivory was as warm, as soft, and as smooth as the skin of a young woman. But if you lightly press her breasts, a dagger suddenly shot out of the hilt. The body of the blade seemed to gleam with a dark

red color, similar to the color of blood when it is dry. There was no doubt whatsoever that every part of this dagger was the masterpiece of a very skilled artisan. Moreover, the age must be very old.

Sha Dahu pulled this dagger out from a small cabinet in a secret compartment behind a bookshelf in his study room. He lightly tapped the mechanism, the dagger popped up, the tip flickered just like flashing blood.

"This is the murder weapon used to assassinate Liu Daxia," Sha Dahu said, "A sharp blade like this, naturally I wanted to keep it personally so that I won't have any worry. At least this place of mine is a lot safer than a coffin shop."

He added, "I really do not wish for it to fall into other people's hands, because all along I wanted to personally give it to you."

It was not a lie, and now it was done.

Lu Xiaofeng held the ivory hilt in his hand. Suddenly he sighed, "It appears that you are a good person. At least you are much better than me." He said to Sha Dahu, "If I were you, I won't hand over this kind of weapon to other people." He then laughed and went on, "If you knew the value and origin of this blade, probably you won't hand it over to me either."

"Oh?"

"This is an antique dagger! Its age is probably a lot older than my

grandfather's grandfather."

"I can see that."

"People have history, daggers do too." Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Can you see its origin?"

"I can't."

"This dagger shot out of the hilt, very few Central Earth's master craftsmen are able to make this kind of weapon, and if it was not a master craftsman, nobody could refine such a sharp blade." Lu Xiaofeng continued, "Therefore, I can tell that it came from Persia."

"Persia?" Sha Dahu asked, "Don't Persians use curved sabers?"

Lu Xiaofeng laughed again, "Isn't this a saber?" [See my note on 'dao' above.]

It was not a saber, it was no more than a dagger. Sha Dahu could only smile wryly.

Why did this damn little bird love to make people pick a stone and smash their own foot?

"I have spent some time in the sea, I knew a bunch of friends, who, as long as there is water around it, they have been to that place. The farthest place they have reached is the end of the earth." Lu Xiaofeng

said, "I believe what they say, although these fellows are not good people, they are both vicious and fierce, bullies who don't talk reasons, but they would never tell a lie to a friend."

These fellows were not pirates. Lu Xiaofeng did have some pirates as friends, but it should not come as a surprise. If his friends were all gentlemen, that should be surprising.

"One of these people was an old skipper, so old that he did not even remember his own surname, given name, and his own age." Lu Xiaofeng said, "This old fellow had this kind of dagger."

Naturally this old skipper was not a fishing boat captain, on the Persian seas, ships carrying imperial family's flags were not uncommon; inevitably these ships would sometimes come across a pirate ship.

Where did the old skipper get his dagger from? Probably it's not hard to imagine.

Even he himself did not deny, "These kinds of daggers are usually seen only in the imperial court."

(Three)

In imperial courts, princes struggled for power, courtiers strived for favor, ministers defamed each other for advancement. Throughout all ages, every royal family could not escape such circumstances, regardless of geographic location, regardless of the country.

In order to struggle for power, strive for favor, any method had been used; assassination, poisoning, and so on were common things.

If a certain prince suddenly died, or a certain courtier suddenly went missing, immediately the ministers privy to this information would do everything in their power to suppress it, there must be absolutely no leak, the emperor must be prevented from knowing the inside story, there must be no scandal in the imperial household.

If someone wanted to investigate, not only he would violate the biggest taboo, he would also provoke others' wrath.

In order to protect themselves, it was often a necessity to make the move first in dealing with other people. Most princes with power and high-ranking ministers employed some kind of strategic advisors, bodyguards and assassins by their sides.

"However, it was only natural that weapons are prohibited in the imperial palaces; therefore, this kind of dagger that looks like a toy became the assassins' weapon of choice," the old skipper said.

Naturally this kind of weapon was not easy to obtain. The skipper continued, "During the time when the situation in Persian royal court was most unstable, this kind of dagger could fetch price as high as five thousand five hundred taels of gold."

He also told Lu Xiaofeng, "In the slave market at that time, stunning blonde girls were the most expensive, yet at most they were only seven or eight taels of gold; if not a virgin, the value was reduced by half."

Five thousand taels of gold for one dagger; how could this kind of invaluable Persian antique appear in this kind of a remote and desolate place? Who owned it? In this kind of small town, who have such qualification? Who had such ability?

In the Persian imperial court, how many people had this kind of qualifications?

Only one kind of person had such qualifications. Only one kind of person was worthy enough to wield such sharp weapon.

But which kind of person?

Naturally, it was the kind of person who was able to use the dagger most effectively, one who could grasp the best timing, and one who once made his move would never fail.

Such persons usually had personality traits and characteristics that other people could not imitate, or even learn to mimic, which differ from the fast blade ordinary people used to stab others in the marketplace.

Because they usually move about in the imperial court.

Hence, their manners were usually very elegant. People who were able cultivate this kind of manners, naturally had considerable scholarly knowledge, self-cultivation, and character. The people they were in contact with would certainly be people with exceptional aristocracy.

Only this kind of assassin could move freely within the heavily guarded

imperial family community. They were able to kill in a flash and got away imperceptibly.

This kind of assassins was completely different to the Jianghu's professional killers.

Jianghu killers must have ordinary appearance, they must not have any characteristic that when people took a glance it would be hard to forget; they must not have any personality traits and individuality that stood out among the masses. Other people must simply forget that they existed.

If you do not think that such people exist, how can you guard against them?

On this matter, there was once a senior who made a famous remark, "If the one you want to kill was a tortoise, then you ought to become a tortoise first to succeed."

(Four)

"Now we have this dagger, what we know it not a few." Lu Xiaofeng said, "First, we know its worth is invaluable, plus it is an antique from Persian royal court; even in Persia I am afraid it is already very difficult to find, the number of people from the Central Earth who are able to obtain it can't be too many."

Even with his extensive knowledge and vast network of friends, so far he had only seen two such daggers.

"The person who can use it, his status must not be low, his martial art skill cannot be weak, plus the way he made his move must be very fast." Lu Xiaofeng said, "If he did not have the confidence that with one strike he would hit his target, yet he still used it to kill people, that is practically the same as revealing this treasure to the world."

With an indifferent tone he asked Sha Dahu, "In your opinion: in here, who has enough qualifications to use this kind of weapon?"

"In my opinion, in here there seems to be only one who has enough qualifications to use it." With a bitter smile Sha Dahu said, "This person seems to be me."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed, "What you say is not wrong, it seems to be so. It's a pity that it's nothing more than 'seems to be'."

"Why?" Sha Dahu's big boss temperament started to flare-up, "You think I don't have enough qualifications?"

"Speaking about using this dagger, your qualifications are certainly enough; I'll say you can afford to buy it." Lu Xiaofeng went on, "But speaking about using it to murder Liu Chengfeng in an instant, then I am sorry."

"What do you mean you are sorry?" Sha Dahu's big boss temper was really aroused, "You don't think I can do it?"

"It's not that you can't do it, but nobody can." Lu Xiaofeng's voice was brimming with confidence, "In all the world, there is absolutely no one

who could kill Liu Chengfeng head-on with one stab of a blade.”

Big Boss Sha stared at him for a good part of half a day. Suddenly, quick as lightning he made his move, he seized the dagger in Lu Xiaofeng’s hand. Lu Xiaofeng was caught off guard. Sha Dahu roared in laughter, “Lu Xiaofeng, this time you are wrong, Liu Chengfeng was killed by me with this dagger. Do you believe me?”

Lu Xiaofeng’s countenance changed, as if he suddenly saw a morning glory flower sprouted out of the man’s nose.

This kind of expression only made the big boss’ temper flare up even higher. Letting out an angry shout, he thrust the dagger in his hand like a lightning toward the pit of Lu Xiaofeng’s stomach.

Of course his speed was a bit slower than real lightning, but considering the short distance he had to cover, it was an easy thing to do.

Apparently Lu Xiaofeng did not expect this move either, it appeared that very soon the tip of the blade would enter his heart.

Right this instant, suddenly two fingers appeared. Nobody could see clearly where these two fingers came from, it seemed that the fingers suddenly appeared directly from Lu Xiaofeng’s heart, and immediately stuck onto the blade.

Another blink of an eye, the dagger already moved into Lu Xiaofeng’s hand.

This time it was Big Boss Sha's countenance that underwent a big change, and it was Lu Xiaofeng who roared in laughter.

"Just now you asked me whether I believe that Liu Chengfeng was killed by you, and now I can give you the answer."

The answer was, "I don't believe it."

"If you said that you can kill Liu Chengfeng with one stab of the blade, then when I blow my horn, I can also blow the horn in Persia."

Big Boss Sha stared at him for another half a day; originally he was so angry that his face turned purple, but suddenly he smiled, "Lu Xiaofeng, you are all right, I submit to you."

He went on, "Only in one thing I disagree with you."

"Which is?"

"You said that there is no one in the world who could kill Liu Chengfeng head-on with one stab of a blade, yet Liu Chengfeng was obviously killed head-on with one stab of a blade." Sha Dahu asked Lu Xiaofeng, "How do you explain that?"

Lu Xiaofeng did not even have to think to answer, "That was because the person who killed him was someone that he definitely never guarded against, a friend that was very close to him."

"I was also his friend."

"But you were not close enough to him."

"What kind of friend would you consider close enough to him?" Big Boss Sha asked.

"Actually, you should also know that people who can make a man did not guard against the most are usually not his friends, usually are not men either."

"If not friends then what are they?"

"A man's lover, usually is not a man."

Big Boss Sha incredulously asked, "Are you saying that you think Liu Chengfeng had a secret lover in here?"

Actually, his question did not need to be asked. As long as a man stays in one place for at least one night, there is good chance that he will have a secret lover. All men are just like that, Liu Chengfeng was not an exception.

The question is: who was his lover? Was it the 'anybody-could-fool-around-with', the grocery store lady boss?

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt a bit uncomfortable in his heart; if he had

thought about this early on, even if a saber was pressed against the major artery on the back and left of his neck, he would never touch a single strand of her hair.

The Big Boss Sha unexpectedly also looked about the same as he did.

-- Was it because he had also had some entanglement with that flirtatious lady boss?

Thinking about it, Lu Xiaofeng's heart became even more uncomfortable, because he had already discovered that his (male) cousin had gone far more than he has ever imagined. [Translator's note: I don't understand it either; could he be referring to Liu Chengfeng, *i.e.* Liu Chengfeng was actually his (maternal) cousin? I don't think it was explained earlier.]

Concerning Liu Chengfeng's death, the clues that he unearthed were far less than he had expected.

He had originally thought that he would find suspects here and there, and from each one he could hopefully trace the bits of clues back to the real killer.

But the suspects were contradicting each other.

When he arrived at this small town, the first one he saw was the Little Beggar. The Little Beggar's surname was unclear, his given name was unclear, his martial art skill unclear, his appearance was sneaky, and had always been sneakily doing some sneaky things. He even sneaked into Lu

Xiaofeng's room and hid under Lu Xiaofeng's bed, and it was unclear what he was looking for.

He was first one Lu Xiaofeng saw when he entered this town, he was also the first one who found Liu Chengfeng's dead body. Hence he would have been a major suspect; although he might not be the real killer, he ought to be an accomplice. Yet he ended up to be a direct disciple of the Beggar Clan, with which Lu Xiaofeng had a very close relation.

Liu Chengfeng's body was kept in a coffin shop. The murder weapon was also kept in the same coffin shop. How could he not consider the coffin shop owner as a suspect?

But the murder weapon already disappeared, and his expression when others wanted to kill him to close his mouth did not look like he was the real killer.

The lady boss looked like she wanted to hook up with everybody she met, anybody could fool around with her, but having affair are not the same as committing murder. Plus her legs were not that pair of legs.

Wang Dayan [reminder: 'da yan' means 'big eye'] was no more than a blind person with opened eyes, his wife was having affairs with other people yet he did not see anything. If somebody said that this man was able to kill Liu Chengfeng head on with one stab, now that would be strange indeed.

Big Boss Sha had enough qualifications to kill Liu Chengfeng: he was wealthy, he knew martial art, and he had people who were willing to sell their lives for him, plus the murder weapon was also in his possession.

Too bad he had a bit too much of big boss mentality.

The most important thing was: these people were born and raised in this place; not only they had the slightest amount of gratitude and grudges with Liu Chengfeng, practically they did not have anything to do with him at all. They had neither a motive nor reason to kill him. It was unfortunate that Liu Chengfeng just died here.

Who killed him? And why?

Lu Xiaofeng knew that there must be a mysterious crucial point that no one was able to obtain. Hidden in one of the corners of the human mind.

His rationale was not wrong.

Too bad that his train of thought had reached a dead end.

By the time he found this crucial point, he had already died.

But how could Lu Xiaofeng die?

Chapter 6 – The nest the fake big robber fled to

(One)

Spring came late. Although spring has arrived in Jiangnan, it was unclear when the spring would arrive in this place. But at least the earth has more or less shown the beginning of spring.

From Sha Dahu's mansion back to the Old Wang's grocery store, was a long yellow sandy soil street. Due to the melting snow, the sandy soil became mud. People walking on mud, each step meant a foot full of mud.

Naturally this feeling was very unpleasant.

Lu Xiaofeng was unwilling to show off his qinggong. He really wished to have a taste of this somewhat desolate, barren spring scenery. The cool and crisp air would be helpful to his thinking.

Very quickly he found a way to get the best of both worlds.

He looked for two rather coarse twigs, and using a dagger, he turned the twigs onto some kind of short walking sticks, which he fastened onto his feet and used the sticks as stilts. Hence he was able to walk happily on the mud.

It was the first time he used the dagger.

Right now it must have been around noon [orig. 'wu' hour, between 11am-1pm]. The breeze blowing his body seemed a little warm. Although he had so many questions in his heart that he did not have the answer, he still felt very comfortable.

He was not the kind of person who held on to worldly riches. Not at all. He never bothered to hold on to it.

He often said, "Worries are just like wealth, it is best to scatter them as soon as possible."

(Two)

A gust of wind blew, the row of stumps by the street had not sprouted any new leaves, the vegetation was still bare.

Lu Xiaofeng did not stop to look at all, he simply called out, "Jin Qiliang."

"Lu Xiaofeng."

Perched atop a barren tree, Jin Qiliang did indeed look like seven tael of cotton [See Chapter 5 for explanation on Jin Qiliang's name].

He looked down on Lu Xiaofeng and giggled, "Actually, I shouldn't call you 'Lu Xiaofeng', you don't look like a bird at all." [Reminder: 'xiao feng' means 'little phoenix'.]

"You look like a little chicken," Jin Qiliang said.

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed. He agreed that the pair of wooden sticks under his feet looked very much like chicken feet.

"Jin Qiliang, what are you doing here? Are you running after me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked with a laugh.

"If I want to run after something, I would have run after a hen; why would I want to run after a little rooster like you?" Jin Qiliang said, "I can't help it, I was forced to run."

"Who forced you?"

"People can't force me, only temper can force me to leave."

"Whose temper?"

"Of course it's the Big Boss!" Jin Qiliang said, "Only Big Boss' temper can force people."

"The Big Boss is mad?"

"Not only is he mad, he is extremely furious."

"What made him mad?"

"Of course he is mad at you." Jin Qiliang said, "He has already taken care of the kitchen, wine and dishes are prepared well, yet you absolutely refused to stay and eat with him. If you were him, wouldn't you be mad as well?"

"I won't be mad," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Not only I won't be mad, I would jump in joy instead."

"In joy?"

"I did not stay in his place to eat, his wine would be saved a bit, his dish would also be saved a bit; why wouldn't I jump in joy? Why would I be angry?"

Jin Qiliang let out a bitter laugh, "Probably because you are not him that you can say such things. That Big Boss of ours is someone who values his face more than his life. Since Lu Xiaofeng has already entered his territory, yet was not willing to eat a bowl of rice at his place, to him, it was practically an extraordinary shame and humiliation, it was practically worse than stealing away his wife. Therefore, I could not swallow my rice either."

"Therefore, you had no choice but to sneak out and look for me?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "Are you thinking of asking me to treat you for lunch?"

Jin Qiliang laughed, "Originally I was thinking of treating you, but since you insist, I cannot not give you any face."

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed, "Originally I was seriously thinking of treating

you; too bad there is not a single restaurant in this place, even if I wanted to treat you, I can do nothing.”

“There is a way,” Jin Qiliang quickly said, “As long as you are willing to pay, I have a way. If I can’t even spend other people’s money, then my name is not Jin Qiliang, but Jin Tugou [lit. dirt dog, a mole cricket/*Gryllotalpa*].”

He did have a way. By handing over ten taels of silver to Wang Dayan, in less than two hours wine and dishes were set up on the table in Lu Xiaofeng’s room.

(Three)

Although there was nothing special with the wine, but the dishes were done very well, especially the simmer-fried chicken, the chicken was cooked very fresh, tender and tasty. Even Lu Xiaofeng, who was usually very picky with his food, was very satisfied, “I did not expect the lady boss actually has such a good culinary skill.”

“This is not the lady boss’ handiwork, it’s Boss Wang’s handiwork.”

With a warm, yet mysterious expression Jin Qiliang looked at Lu Xiaofeng, “What’s more, he seems to eat anything.”

Lu Xiaofeng had his eyes fixed on the chicken.

Jin Qiliang looked at him. At first he seemed to be nearly smiling, but in the end he sighed deliberately and said, “When others stole one egg in

his shop, he could see it clearly, but when others stole his wife, he did not even notice." Jin Qiliang went on, "Do you know that there is a very popular old joke in this town?"

Although Lu Xiaofeng really wished that he was deaf at the moment, he could not ignore him, "What joke?"

"Zhao Xiazi [lit. blind, see Chapter 3] has a pair of shifty eyes that can see everything, Wang Dayan [again, see Chapter 3] has a blind open-wide eye."

Jin Qiliang deliberately laughed aloud again, as if he had just told the funniest joke on earth. Too bad before he could laugh too long, he already had to stop laughing. Because Lu Xiaofeng stuffed his mouth with a piece of chicken drumstick.

Whenever lady boss was mentioned, Lu Xiaofeng immediately wished to change the subject; to his dismay, however, this time the one changing the subject was not him, but Jin Qiliang.

"Lu Xiaofeng, let me be honest with you, although the number of times we met is not many, but I always regard you as my friend," Jin Qiliang said, "Even if you don't consider me as a friend, I still consider you as my friend."

His drinking capacity did not seem to be too big, after drinking a few cups, he already appeared a bit tipsy.

"I know you must be wondering, you feel strange that I would flee to

this place," Jin Qiliang said, "The world is big, I, Jin Qiliang can go to any place, anywhere I go, people would treat me as honored guest, would regard me as a wealthy man; why would I want to come over here to take shelter under that arrogant and conceited alive mole cricket who would rather die than lose face?"

Several cups of wine entered his tummy, a burst of heroic spirit arose in his breast; all of a sudden the Big Boss became 'alive mole cricket'. Lu Xiaofeng had heard about it many times before, Lu Xiaofeng had seen things like this too many times before.

However, the question Jin Qiliang had just asked him, even if he did not want to comment, he had to ask, "So why did you come here?"

"Because of a snake, a viper that is a hundred times more poisonous than scarlet-line serpent," Jin Qiliang replied.

Obviously this snake was not a real snake, because there is simply no snake in the world that is a hundred times more poisonous than scarlet-line snake; therefore, Lu Xiaofeng immediately thought of something, "The snake you are talking about, most probably is not a real snake, but a person." Lu Xiaofeng said, "The person you are talking about, most probably is the Snake Cavalier."

(Four)

Snake Cavalier should not be young anymore, twenty-five years ago, seven southern and sixty-three northern provinces' escort agency alliance's Head Escort 'Steady As Mount Tai' Kong Taishan already issued a call to the wulin world to hunt and capture him, more than that, to kill

him at all cost.

This matter was widely known around Jianghu. What they did not know was: why was Old Chief Kong so angry toward a young man who had just made his debut?

But people believed that someone like Old Chief Kong would not take any action without a strong reason. Anybody who managed to reach the 'Old Chief' position like him would not do anything without any strong reason. If he wanted to kill Snake Cavalier, it must be that Snake Cavalier really deserved to die.

"Not only this person is most venomous than snakes, he is even more slippery than snakes. I have been trying to track him down for seven, eight months, until finally I learned that he appeared on this road." Jin Qiliang said, "I also heard that this place is Big Boss Sha's territory, as long as it is a friend who has a bit of name in Jianghu, as long as he came here, it did not matter how big the criminal case against him, Big Boss Sha would definitely offer shelter."

"Hence you deduced that that snake must be hiding in Sha Dahu's place to seek refuge from the enemy."

"Anybody would think the same thing." Jin Qiliang said, "You must also be thinking that those two people, one man, one woman, must be fugitives who seek shelter under Big Boss Sha's roof."

"That's right."

"But you are wrong."

Lu Xiaofeng immediately asked, "How did you know I was wrong? How did you know that the people I am looking for are not fugitives in that place?"

"Because they really believe that I killed Little Tian, they all believe that Eighth Grand Master Tian absolutely wanted my life; therefore, they did not conceal anything from me." Jin Qiliang said, "They already consider me as one of them, nobody has any idea that it is just a front."

"The one you want to kill is a b@stard, so you have to become a b@stard first. You want to sneak into a pile of turtles to pry into their secret, naturally you have to become a turtle first."

"Big Boss Sha has always loved to be told about other people's deepest secret, in his house he shelters a number of big robbers, fugitives of the Jianghu, occasionally he would pretend to be careless and leak out several names." Jin Qiliang said, "The names he mentioned are indeed sensational."

He continued, "Watching the reaction of other people when he mentioned those names, Big Boss Sha always feels very happy."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed, "To be able to provide shelter to those big caliber criminals with impressive reputation in his house, it is indeed a serious matter." Lu Xiaofeng said, "Not only he himself gets a kick out of it, other people would also feel that he has a serious face."

Jin Qiliang sighed, "Big bosses always want a lot of face, it's just that this Big Boss Sha's craving for a face is a bit excessive."

"How excessive?"

"The way he wants a face is almost as if he has no face."

"Why?"

"Because those big caliber criminals he is harboring are all fake goods." Jin Qiliang said, "Those people knew the Big Boss' temper, therefore, they adapt to his taste. Some claimed they have run amuck around such-and-such places around Huai River, some said they killed people like scything flax under so-and-so's banner."

"And the truth is?"

With a wry smile Jin Qiliang said, "The truth is that they all are no more than some third-rate small-time thieves; not only there is no character of the Snake Cavalier's caliber, basically there is no one with crime worth mentioning at all." And then he asked Lu Xiaofeng, "Among those small sons of a b1tch who talk nonsense and eat and drink indolently, how could there be the persons you are looking for?"

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbstruck.

Hearing this kind of matters, of course he found it to be funny, yet right now he could not even laugh.

These fugitives were originally his biggest suspects, as well as his most important clue; but now it was broken.

The killer who murdered Icf seemed to have completely disappeared, so much so that they did not seem to exist at all.

Evidently Jin Qiliang understood his mood very well; he picked up the cup and downed the wine first, "Lu Xiaofeng, you don't have to feel bad. Speaking about feeling bad, I feel worse than you do." He poured a cup for Lu Xiaofeng, "We seem to be in the same boat, this time we took a wasted trip; we'd better go home together now!"

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly laughed, "This place is so fun, how could I bear to leave?"

This time it was Jin Qiliang's turn to be dumbstruck. "You said this place is fun?"

"Of course it is fun." Lu Xiaofeng said, "It is very fun."

He did not lie. The more dangerous the situation, the more fun it was for him. The more unexplainable the problem, the more interesting it was to Lu Xiaofeng.

It was Lu Xiaofeng's usual style.

But when he said those words, perhaps even in his dream he would not

expect that very soon he would die in that place.

By this time, however, Lu Xiaofeng did not know that he would die, and he had not given up all hope either.

"Other than those bunch of fake big bandits, others are born and bred in this place?"

"Seems like it." Jin Qiliang thought for a moment before adding, "I think only one person is not."

"Who? Who is not?"

"Gong Susu."

This was the first time Lu Xiaofeng heard this name. The name was clearly a very noble, elegant and beautiful name, it can definitely arouse men's interest, anybody would not associate this name with a lady who sells pork at the market. Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng immediately asked, "What kind of person is she?"

"She is a woman whose elegant demeanor is extraordinarily well, her scholarly knowledge is also unusually good, her view is distinct, her style of conversation is also very graceful. Not only that, she lacks none of the four arts of the Chinese Scholar [i.e. zither, Go, calligraphy, painting]." Jin Qiliang deliberately sighed, "Only in one area she is lacking."

"Which area?" Lu Xiaofeng eagerly asked.

"She likes to drink," Jin Qiliang slowly and deliberately said, "There was one time I saw it with my own eyes, during meal she drank a whole jar of white wine. Finished drinking, her face did not even change color."

Lowering his voice, he continued spoke to Lu Xiaofeng very mysteriously, "If you ask me, someone like her, why would she want to live in this kind of place?" Jin Qiliang went on, "Well, I'll tell you, she did not come here on her own account, rather, she can't leave even if she wanted to."

"Why?"

Jin Qiliang lowered his voice even more, "Because she was originally a beloved concubine of a prince of the reigning royal family; because she committed a crime, offending the Prince, she was banished to this place."

Lu Xiaofeng's four eyebrows started to droop. He sighed and said, "I know it, I know you are trying to harm me."

"I'm harming you?" Jin Qiliang appeared to be deeply hurt, "How could I harm you?"

"You obviously know that when I found out that there is such woman in this place, if I don't see her, I won't be able to sleep well tonight." Lu Xiaofeng said, "And now, what do you want me to do?"

"What to do? It's very easy." Jin Qiliang said, "You want to see her, I'll take you there. Not only that, I'll ask her to invite you for a drink."

When they left the grocery store, the lady boss' countenance looked like a piece of iron panel, she looked at Lu Xiaofeng with cold eyes, as if she wished to strangle him right then and there.

Lu Xiaofeng did not even look at her.

Chapter 7 – Fairy of the Ninth Heaven descending to mundane world

(One)

Bamboo fence, a gate made of twigs, half a courtyard of plum blossom. Looking past the bamboo and plum blossom, Lu Xiaofeng could vaguely see three or two pomegranate wood buildings.

In his imagination, even though an imperial concubine has fallen from grace, her residence ought to be a lot more lordly from this place.

Evidently this prince's concubine was not someone who paid particular attention to show of extravagance, unlike that Big Boss Sha who valued face more than his life. As long as she could pass her days in peace and comfort, she was perfectly contented.

Therefore, before Lu Xiaofeng even saw her, he already had an extremely favorable impression on her.

An exiled prince's concubine, a plum-blossom-like body with flesh of ice and bones of jade, a past that no one knew about, unforgettable old dreams flowed in her bosom; how mysterious, how romantic.

Even though Lu Xiaofeng was not drunk, he seemed to be drunk. All along Jin Qiliang paid a close attention to his expression; he suddenly sighed. "Now I realize that I should not have brought you here," Jin Qiliang said.

"Why?"

"I am really afraid that as soon as you see her, you'll forget your manners." Jin Qiliang said, "In front of someone like her, you need to say only one wrong word for someone to die."

Lu Xiaofeng patted his shoulder, "Don't worry, what kind of person have I not seen?"

Yet Jin Qiliang was not convinced, he still sighed, "I know that you have met not a few people, all kinds and sorts of people you have seen. It's a pity that the one you are about to see is practically not a person."

"Not a person? Then what is she?"

"A fairy of the ninth heaven being banished down into the mundane world."

(Two)

There was a string of bells hanging on the underside of the eaves above the door. The bells have been rung for a long time before someone came out to answer the door.

The one answering the door was not a boy, but an old woman, the entire hair on her head was white, in fact, her entire body has withered, the number of teeth remaining inside her mouth was at most only three or five. Yet Jin Qiliang spoke to her in a very respectful manner, "Popo [grandma], I am surnamed Jin, I have been here before, I am sure you still

remember me. Last time it was also you who opened the door for me."

The old woman looked at him with squinted eyes; it was not clear whether she still remembered this kind of man, it was not clear either whether she even heard what he said, so much so that perhaps she did not even see this man.

But Jin Qiliang acted like he was very familiar with the old granny; pulling Lu Xiaofeng's shoulder he said to her, "This is my friend, his name is Lu Xiaofeng; I am taking him here to see your gongzhu [imperial empress/milady, see Book 6 Chapter 9 for more on 'gong zhu']."

Jin Qiliang said, "I am sorry to trouble you, please tell your Gongzhu that she must invite him for a nice dinner, and some nice cups of wine."

The old lady who answered the door was still looking at him with a bewildered, totally-lost expression, yet Jin Qiliang acted as if he had accomplished great success. He actually said to Lu Xiaofeng, "Lu Xiaofeng, you must take a good care of yourself, pay attention to everything, I am sure we'll meet again someday."

It was as if someone had just whipped Lu Xiaofeng on the buttocks with a chain; his entire body seemed to stiffen and was about to jump. "You mean, you are leaving now?" he asked Jin Qiliang.

"That's right."

"How can you go now?"

“Why can’t I go now?” In a right and self-confident manners Jin Qiliang said, “You wanted to see Gong Susu, and now I have brought you here. Not only that, I have asked her to invite you for a dinner, for a drink.”

He went on, “I have done everything I promised you; if I don’t go now, what am I waiting for?” He said he would go, and indeed he left; not only that, he left very quickly.

With a bitter expression and squinted eyes the old lady was still standing at the door, she did not show the least bit of sign that she was going to let Lu Xiaofeng in.

If the one blocking the door was an eight-feet tall, intimidating and powerful looking burly man, Lu Xiaofeng had at least eight hundred ways of how to deal with him; but toward an old lady, whose teeth were about to fall off completely, Lu Xiaofeng could not think of even one way to deal with her.

The old woman seemed to be determined not to let Lu Xiaofeng in. It’s not that she did not hear Jin Qiliang, it’s just that she considered everything he said dog fart.

Lu Xiaofeng understood this fact.

In this kind of situation, any sensitive or tactful person would just leave. It’s not that Lu Xiaofeng was not sensitive or tactful, rather, he was a man who would not stop until he reached the Yellow River [idiom: persevere until reaching one’s goal].

Moreover, he always considered himself as an expert in dealing with women. When women saw him, they would become like Zhu Bajie [pig-like character in Journey to the West] eating ginseng, became muddleheaded that they could not distinguish east, west, north and south. Women from the age of eight to eighty were just the same.

Right now he raised his own spirit, ready to deal with this old woman, and he had high confidence in his heart.

Dealing with an old woman, it would be best to consider her to be a little girl. Precisely like when you are facing a little girl, never say that she has not grown up yet.

Naturally he had already thought about a plausible story to tell. But suddenly he discovered that there was another person standing at the end of the garden path, staring at him with fiery eyes.

It was a woman, her age probably twenty-six or twenty-seven years. According to the norm at that time, she could not be considered a young woman anymore, the distance between her current age with the criteria of youthfulness of jade-maiden was already too far.

But Lu Xiaofeng was convinced that when the woman was fifteen, sixteen years old, nobody would possibly consider her because of her character and mean demeanor; her face always carried an expression as if everybody in the world owed her money and did not pay.

In all his life this kind of women was what Lu Xiaofeng fear the most; just at the sight of them was enough to make him wanted to fight.

The woman was bent on staring at him; she looked at him from head to toe, from toe back to his head. Her pair of black and bright eyes looked like two charcoal briquettes that have just been scooped out from an icehouse.

"Hey, you, what are you doing here?" she asked Lu Xiaofeng. Unexpectedly she spoke with a Beijing accent, it was very pleasant to the ears.

Being stared at by her, Lu Xiaofeng already wanted to explode, yet he could not not answering her, "I came especially to pay my respect to Gongzhu, I have a friend who told me that Gongzhu will definitely see me."

"What kind of 'thing' is that friend of yours? And what kind of 'thing' are you? What made you think that you have a right to barge in here?"

"I am not a 'thing', I am a man." Lu Xiaofeng sighed, "I already told people this I don't know how many times, why do people always fail to see this point?"

"Fortunately, I have already seen it."

"You saw what?"

"I saw that you are basically not a 'thing', therefore, you'd better hurry up and go away, lest I get angry."

"I was going to go away. If you are Gongzhu, I would have gone away."

Lu Xiaofeng flashed a very pleasant smile, "Fortunately, I have already seen it."

"You saw what?"

"I saw that you are not Gongzhu." Lu Xiaofeng said, "On your whole body, from top to bottom, there is not the least bit of Gongzhu quality at all."

The woman's wooden, stiff face was unexpectedly now aglow with anger, her eyes shot fire, as if the charcoal briquette have been lit.

Yet Lu Xiaofeng was still trying to annoy her more.

"Actually, I don't blame you at all, although all along you have been shouting and yelling at me, throwing tantrums at me, I can still forgive you." Indeed Lu Xiaofeng's voice seemed to be brimming with sympathy and understanding, "Because I know that if a woman your age has not yet married, the anger inside will be inevitably big."

If Lu Xiaofeng's reaction was a bit slower, those words would be the very last words he said in his life.

A split second more, a short dagger, one-chi three-cun long [about 15"/40cm], would have pierced his heart.

This dagger came very fast, it was even faster than Lu Xiaofeng could ever imagined.

The woman whom Lu Xiaofeng provoked to half-dead was originally standing on the flower path more than a zhang away [1 zhang is about 10ft/3m], but suddenly she had arrived in front of Lu Xiaofeng, and a dagger suddenly appeared in her hand, with the tip of the dagger suddenly arrived in front of the pit of Lu Xiaofeng's stomach.

The way she moved the blade was not only fast, but strange as well; the way she positioned the blade was also very unusual, very weird.

Actually, very few people ever evaded this blade. Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng did not even try to evade. He simply stretched out his two fingers and gently nipped the blade.

After all, what kind of fingers were Lu Xiaofeng's two fingers? Weren't the fingers blessed by deities and spirits in heaven, and cursed by demons? Wasn't there some sort of unfathomable magical power on those fingers?

No one knew.

But everybody in Jianghu knew that these two fingers worth ten times the value of diamond of the same size as the fingers. It was said that once someone was willing to spend five-hundred-thousand taels to buy these two fingers.

Because he only needed to stretch these two fingers and pinched lightly, absolutely nothing in the world that they could not clamp; even a lightning fast blade was no exception, it was clamped by these two fingers.

It was said that these two fingers had completely interlinked with his heart and mind. Nobody knew how many killer weapons in the hands of wulin experts had been caught, nobody knew how many times these two fingers had saved his life.

This time was no different. Naturally the blade was also caught.

The woman wielding the dagger plainly saw that the blade was about to enter Lu Xiaofeng's heart. She had always had high confidence in her skill and speed in using the blade, and originally this blade was not supposed to miss.

Yet the fact was that the blade did not pierce its target, and could not be pulled back either. It was as if it suddenly pierced a piece of rock, and was suddenly got stuck inside.

And then her face paled.

In all her life she had never imagined that her blade would be caught by just two fingers, not only that, it happened only in an instant.

This kind of thing would never have happened.

She exerted her strength to pull the dagger out, but she could not. She exerted her strength to push it forward, yet it did not move even one tiny bit. Practically her blade seemed to grow roots in Lu Xiaofeng's fingers.

She raised her left foot to kick. When she kicked, her shoulder did not move, her eyes did not blink. Her kick did not give any warning at all; surprisingly, the kick she was using was the extremely-difficult-to-train 'shadowless kick'. Therefore, her kick immediately went toward Lu Xiaofeng's hand.

Her feet were natural, they were not bound. The shoes she was wearing were embroidered satin that was as soft and as light as skin. When caught inside Lu Xiaofeng's hand, it felt just like a bare foot. Therefore, her pale face suddenly blushed pink, even her breathing seemed to be a little bit shorter but faster.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt that she was not as ugly nor annoying as a moment ago, so much so that he started to feel that she was a bit alluring, a bit touching.

But the tone of her voice was still as harsh, "What are you doing?" she asked Lu Xiaofeng.

"I am not doing anything."

"Why did you catch my foot?"

"Because you were kicking me."

"Let me go."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to be kicked to death by you."

The toothless old lady has been standing on the side, watching them with a wide grin on her face, as if she was watching an opera. At first Lu Xiaofeng thought that she was a mute; unexpectedly now she smiled wide and asked, "You can't let her foot go, are you going to hold her foot in your hand like that for the rest of your life?"

The pink face blushed deeper red now, the heart was beating even faster, the situation did not look too good.

Right this moment, suddenly from the small house deep inside the flowers and trees came a voice, "Gong Ping, don't fool around in front of Lu Gongzi [young master], quickly invite him in!"

Not only the voice was noble and graceful, it was also gentle, soft and sweet; what kind of person had such voice? One could only imagine.

Lu Xiaofeng's face seemed to blush a little as well. Under any circumstances, holding a young woman's foot in his hand was definitely not something that a gentleman would do.

Yet the toothless old lady plainly took this exact moment to speak to him, still with a wide smile on her face, "Young man, if I were you, I would never let her go. I guarantee that as soon as you let go, your belly will be kicked."

Lu Xiaofeng still loosened his grip.

To him, being kicked in the stomach was not a big deal, even if he was kicked seven, eight times, he would not die, but if he was being despised by a noble, beautiful, and a wine lover woman, he could really die.

The old woman looked at him, she laughed that the wrinkles on the corner of her eyes grew even deeper, "Lu Xiaofeng, you are indeed not a 'thing', now even I, an old woman, who is not only old, but my eyes are almost blind, can see that."

Not only Gong Ping did not lift her leg to kick Lu Xiaofeng's abdomen, it seemed that she did not even dare to look up. With her head down she walked away, leading him along the flowery path.

Lu Xiaofeng followed behind her.

There are two types of women in the world. The first type walks like a coffin on the move. The other type walks with their waists swaying like fresh, beautiful flower in the wind.

Gong Ping belonged to the second type, but she deliberately trying to control herself, intentionally putting up a very rigid appearance, never letting her body parts below the waist to sway the least bit, never letting the person walking behind her to see any movement.

Too bad no matter how hard one tries, one's posture is very difficult to conceal; no matter what, one simply cannot turn a coffin into a flower,

and vice versa, no one can change a flower into a coffin.

Walking behind her, Lu Xiaofeng was extremely delighted. Ever since he came to this small town, which even bird did not lay eggs, his mood has never been better.

But by the time he saw Gong Susu, he felt more unbearable than if his stomach was being kicked.

There was neither flower nor burning incense inside the room, but there was a distinct smell of fragrance similar to the newly sawed wood deep in the mountains, clean and fresh. A woman wearing violet robe was standing with her back to the door. She stood in front of the painting 'Ferocious Hunting in The Fall'.

Drawn in the picture was a king, riding on a white tall steed, with a bow in his hand and arrows in the quiver, a hawk perched on his shoulder, while his entourage followed behind him, shouting and cheering, and the hunting dogs jumping and howling by the horse.

A clear and boundless sky, blue sky, crisp autumn weather, the king was high-spirited and vigorous, the painting looked alive on paper.

But the one looking at the painting was as thin as paper. Lu Xiaofeng sighed inwardly.

Naturally he had already guessed who the king on the painting was, and the one looking at the painting was, of course, the Gong Susu that he wholeheartedly wanted to see.

Those two people, one in the painting, one in a dream. Dreams are like smoke, lingering from the past, passion and enmity intertwined, love and hate intersect; even if the one in the painting could forget, how could the one looking at the painting deal with it?

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly felt that perhaps he should not have barged in on her at this kind of time, yet he could not bear not to see her just for a quick glance.

This feeling made him really wanted to give himself a couple of heavy slaps on the face.

When she turned around, Lu Xiaofeng only had one kind of feeling. He felt that he was a complete fool.

This imperial lady was definitely not the person he was looking for.

Although her hair was still jet-black and shiny, although her body was well-maintained, her facial features were also still as noble and graceful as before, but her prime years had passed long ago.

Based on her age, she was old enough to be Lu Xiaofeng's mother.

A woman like her, nobody would ever associate her with a murder case.

Like a confused man, Lu Xiaofeng has blindly come to this place, furthermore, he insisted on seeing her, as if he would die if he did not see

her.

But now Lu Xiaofeng did not even have the courage to take a glance toward her.

Yet Gong Susu was looking at him. With some kind of extraordinary elegance she smiled and said, "Lu Gongzi, we have never met before, we have not had any dealings with each other either, yet you insist on seeing me; is there any particular reason?"

"There isn't," Lu Xiaofeng hurriedly replied, "Not the least bit of reason."

"Why did you insist on seeing me then?"

Lu Xiaofeng could only laugh wryly. Naturally he could not tell her that 'a friend' has swindled him to come; he could not tell her even more that he was here to investigate a murder case, that he was following a clue. Sometimes he could not even tell a lie.

He could only stand there with a foolish look on his face; just like a child that has just been caught doing something wrong by his teacher.

Suddenly Gong Susu's eyes were brimming with sympathy and understanding. "I understand your feeling. Right now you must be very disappointed in your heart, because you have never expected that I am this old." Her laughter was extremely gentle and warm, "Women who are old are like wine that have been kept in the dark for a long time; Lu Gongzi can't possibly be interested in it."

Now Lu Xiaofeng really wished he could dig a hole and crawl into it, or perhaps find a place where there is no one else, and then crash his own head against the wall. If Jin Qiliang were around right now, he would definitely strung him with a very long rope, and hang him till he was dead.

Gong Susu laughed again and said, "It's just that Lu Gongzi's illustrious name, I have long looked forward to meeting you. Since you are already here, I must ask you to stay and have a cup of wine." She said, "But I also know that this cup of wine, you would drink it with very much difficulty."

She was a woman who understood men very well, plus she was very gentle. This kind of women was not too many then, and now it is getting less and less.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly raised his head to look straight at her; with much difficulty he said, "I really want to say a few words, but I am not sure if I should say it."

"Speak."

"No matter how old you are, you are the most gentle and the most lovely women that I have ever treasured in my life." Lu Xiaofeng looked at her eyes, "I am telling you the truth, I don't know if you believe me or not."

"I certainly believe you," Gong Susu said. Suddenly she smiled sweetly, "Even if you said those words just to please me, I would rather believe it as the truth."

Lu Xiaofeng also laughed. With this laughter he reverted back to his unique, pleasant and bright personality. "I also hope that what Gongzhu said just now is also the truth; you really wanted me to stay and have a cup of wine."

"If it is the truth?"

"Then I wish that Gongzhu will not give me just a cup of wine." Lu Xiaofeng said, "To be able to drink wine with such a beautiful woman like Gongzhu, I want to at least drink three, five hundred cups."

On Gong Susu's smiling face suddenly appeared a young-girl-like blush, even her eyes seemed to be brightened. "No wonder people say that Lu Xiaofeng is a lovely man, even an old woman like me is also fond of you, much less those young misses."

Drinking wine was undoubtedly a delight, therefore, since time immemorial, there are always people who drink wine, moreover, the number of those who drink is not necessarily less than those who don't.

People who drink can also be divided into two groups. The first group will be drunk as soon as they drink, once they are drunk they will vomit, speak mouthful of nonsense, crawl on the ground, run wildly around the house naked, so much so that they might set the house on fire; anything can happen.

Some people are not easy to get drunk, or even if they are drunk, others are not able to see it. No matter how much they drink, not only they do not throw up, make noise or go wild, their faces do not even change. Sometimes after drinking a bit of wine, they are much more clear-headed

than people who don't drink; even their reaction becomes much faster than usual.

Lu Xiaofeng was such a person.

He himself did not deny that when he first came here, his brains was a bit not too clear.

An invaluable Persian dagger, a bewildering murder case, plus a banished imperial lady very full with romantic fantasy. His head seemed to be stuffed full of confusing, mixed up matters. It was not until he downed seven, eight cups of zhuyeqing [green bamboo leaf (wine)] in one go that he felt that all these confusing things were flushed clean.

His mind suddenly became clear again. Something that he did not notice a while ago, suddenly reappeared on his mind, and also suddenly became very important to him.

First of all, he recalled Gong Ping's feet and legs. When he grabbed her foot, he could feel the firmness of her leg, the strength and elasticity of her flesh and muscles. At that time he should have thought about the pair of long and firm legs underneath the purple long skirt. At that time he should have thought about trying to look at Gong Ping's legs.

The first time he met a woman, he should have looked at her legs; although he would be going a bit too far, for the sake of a good friend's death, going a bit too far is excusable.

Next, Lu Xiaofeng thought about Gong Susu's voice. Her voice was

gentle and graceful. Only an extremely educated lady of a prestigious family could be so touching.

The first time Lu Xiaofeng heard her voice, he was still on the flower path in the courtyard, but her voice came from the wooden cabin, "Gong Ping, don't fool around in front of Lu Gongzi, quickly invite him in."

At that time they have not met, how did she know that the visitor outside was Lu Xiaofeng?

The little cabin was some distance away from the flower garden, the gentle, soft and sweet voice was definitely not a shout or scream. She spoke gently, yet from far away Lu Xiaofeng was able to hear every single word very clearly, as if the speaker was right next to him.

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly realized that it was not a case of friend of a friend swindled him to come here, there was totally no reason behind it.

Sometimes, although drinking a bit of wine can make people become more clear-headed and keen, unfortunately, this time it was not so much.

Drinking till this time, one is usually not too far away from being drunk. Sometimes one would feel that he is as sober as Han Xin[1], who was able to move his troops like deity, whose prediction of enemy's movement never missed; but then suddenly one would feel so drunk that he did not even know what nonsense he was talking about.

Lu Xiaofeng's condition was like that.

All this time Gong Ping stayed by Gong Susu's side, to wait upon her. All along Lu Xiaofeng was staring at her legs. Noticing his gaze, Gong Ping was so angry that her face paled, but like a leering thief Lu Xiaofeng was still staring at her, and he was giggling at her.

"Miss Ping, I bet you look better wearing skirt than wearing trousers, and if you don't wear any skirt at all, I bet you will look even better."

What kind of bull's1t was it?

Gong Ping suddenly made her move. From the ribbon wrapped around her waist she suddenly pulled a blade forged from best quality Myanmar steel. Stirring the air around it, the blade vibrated into a random pattern, and was thrust into Lu Xiaofeng's eye.

A lot of people actually thought that Lu Xiaofeng's eyes should be blinded.

If he were blind, there would be no way he could use his two demon-possessed fingers to clamp other people's weapon.

If he were blind, a lot of other people's secrets would be safe, because he would not be able to see a lot of things that other people did not want him to see.

Too bad in this world, eight or nine out of ten matters did not go as one wish. Oftentimes God did not do as humans' desire.

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng did not go blind yet. Therefore, he saw that

when Gong Ping pulled the dagger, a piece of jade pendant fell from her belt.

Seeing this piece of jade pendant, immediately his countenance changed, as if he was really stabbed by the blade; furthermore, the blade was piercing his vital point.

The blade was only seven cun, seven fen long [approx. 20cm/8"], a short dagger. The technique used was appropriate for this kind of dagger, the style and variation were very fast, the way she moved was very vicious. It was indeed the main principle of dagger technique.

Gong Ping held the dagger in an upside-down manner, with her thumb inside the ring at the end of the hilt. As soon as her strike missed, the tip of the dagger slashed horizontally across Lu Xiaofeng's face.

Looking at the speed with which she changed the direction of the blade, making an 'X' on other people's face seemed to be easy enough; piercing the enemy's heart in one stab did not seem to be a too-difficult-matter either.

Looking at the viciousness, efficient and straightforward way in which she moved, without the slightest degree of hesitation at all, it was obvious that it was not the first time she attempted to do this thing.

Unfortunately, this time unexpectedly her blade failed to slash; in fact, she could not even move the blade half a cun. Because her blade was suddenly clamped by Lu Xiaofeng's two fingers.

She has always been very wary of Lu Xiaofeng's two fingers. With the lesson she learned the previous time, she was confident that this time she would not 'follow the track of an overturned cart'.

Yet for an unknown reason these two fingers suddenly popped out of nowhere and caught her blade; as if the fingers suddenly materialized out of thin air.

Worse yet, this time Lu Xiaofeng was not as polite as the last time.

While his right hand's thumb and index fingers clipped the tip of the dagger, his left hand clutched around her neck. In an instant his foot also stepped on hers, so that she was tightly under his control.

Gong Ping was so angry that her eyes seemed to be shooting fire, yet she was absolutely unable to move.

The imperial lady sighed, "Lu Gongzi, I always heard that you are a man with the most compassion toward fragrance and appreciation toward jade, but looking at your manner right now, you are really unworthy of the compliment." She sighed and then added, "You are really disappointing."

Lu Xiaofeng also sighed, "To be honest with you, even I am a bit disappointed at myself."

"In my opinion, a man who carry [on a shoulder pole] manure for a living will have a bit better manners toward a girl than you do."

"In my opinion, most probably they are not just a bit better, but seventy, eighty, or even ninety percent better than I am."

"Then why did you do it?" Gong Susu asked, "Are you drunk?"

"I am not." Lu Xiaofeng replied in deadly earnest, "I can guarantee that I am at least seventy, eighty, or even ninety percent more sober than any manure carrier in the world."

"By doing that, what is it that you actually want?"

With a devious chuckle Lu Xiaofeng said, "Actually, I don't want anything; I just want to ask her trousers to leave her momentarily, so that I can take a look at her legs."

What kind of dog fart was that? Compared to the worst smelling dog fart in the world, it was at least seventy, eighty, or even ninety percent more stinky. Could it be that this man was crazy?

He was not crazy. The one nearly went crazy from anger was Gong Ping.

With a very shocked expression on her face Gong Susu looked at him, up and down from head to toe, for half a day, and then she sighed and said, "Now I finally know what this is all about."

"Oh?"

"Lu Xiaofeng would never do such thing, yet you are doing it; hence,

essentially you are not Lu Xiaofeng.”

“I am not Lu Xiaofeng? What kind of toy am I?”

“You are not much of a toy,” Gong Susu drily said, “You are no more than an anthomaniac.” [Translator’s note: not sure, 花痴. My dictionary did not give me any definition that makes sense, Bing translator gave me a simple ‘s1ut’, Google translator came up with ‘anthomaniac’, which, upon further search, yielded ‘a person who suffers an extravagant passion for flowers’. Additional note (courtesy of Lu DongBin): 花 (hua), flowers - allusion to women; 痴 (chi) pertaining to mind, something psychotic. Combined it means an unhealthy erotic appetite for women, a skirt chaser, womanizer.]

She went on, “If a woman is an anthomaniac, perhaps men would love her. But anthomaniac men are different; when a woman sees an anthomaniac man, there is only one way to deal with him.”

Unexpectedly Lu Xiaofeng acted like he was very interested, “Which way?” he asked.

The imperial lady spelled out word by word, “This way.” [Orig. 就是这种法子 – ‘exactly this kind of way’.]

This sentence only has six words. Before she even finished speaking all six words, five different objects already flew toward Lu Xiaofeng.

A pair of chopsticks, a wine cup, a small dish of soy sauce, and a big bowl full of soup.

The bowl was the first to fly. Because the bowl was still more than half full of winter bamboo shoots and chicken soup, when the bowl flew, the soup splashed. Even though it did not splash onto Lu Xiaofeng's eyes, it did obstruct his line of sight, so that as behind the bowl a series of attack came one after another, he could not see it clearly.

This attack was textbook style 'poti' ['po' - break/defeat, 'ti' – topic/subject'; writing style in which the main subject is approached directly from the outset]. Those without learning won't be able to break [po] this problem [ti].

After that, the wine cup flew. When it was flying, it already disintegrated into seventy, eighty pieces, just like seventy, eighty pieces of irregularly shaped objects, some had sharp corners like sharp secret projectiles.

The pair of chopsticks flew as two flying nails, one flew toward Lu Xiaofeng's hand that was clamping the blade, the other toward the small of his back.

The wide and flat soy sauce dish was spinning incessantly in the air, nobody knew the target of its attack, which part of Lu Xiaofeng's body would it strike? The saucer was round, as it spun, how could anybody tell its direction?

Lu Xiaofeng was not mistaken. This delicate, gentle and graceful dying king's concubine was a martial art expert with consummate skills.

Obviously she was able to speak from several zhang away, yet made the

hearer felt as if she was speaking right next to his ear. It was a feat no ordinary people could do. The strike that she just launched, even less people would be able to accomplish.

The five objects were plain utensils that people use daily during meals, yet in her hands, these objects have become deadly weapons. Moreover, with just one attack, she had completely sealed the opponent's escape route.

A prince's concubine who had fallen from grace due to disfavor, how did she acquire this supreme feat that was able to kill people in an instant? How could her move be this accurate, experienced, carefully planned, and impenetrable?

Is it because her killing experience was much richer than anybody could ever imagine?

Looking at the way she made her move just now, most probably it was very seldom that she failed to kill her target. She made her move this time, naturally she was also confident that she would succeed.

Every angle, every situation, had been very carefully considered. Only one thing that she did not consider.

She did not consider the chicken soup.

People may have different views on chicken soup, yet chicken soup treats everybody equally.

Chicken soup in a bowl, you drink it, it is chicken soup; other people drink it, it is still chicken soup. Chicken soup splashed out, the liquid splashing onto people's eyes is still chicken soup. While it is true that the chicken soup obstructed Lu Xiaofeng's line of sight, Gong Susu was equally affected.

By the time the chicken soup filled the air like droplets of rain, Gong Susu suddenly discovered that Lu Xiaofeng has disappeared.

Lu Xiaofeng was gone, it was not a big deal, but even Gong Ping has also disappeared. So much so that the jade pendant that was falling on the floor just now also disappeared without a trace.

To top it off, Lu Xiaofeng still wholeheartedly wanted to see the pair of legs belonging to Gong Ping.

[1] Han Xin (-196BC), famous general of first Han emperor Liu Bang.

Chapter 8 – Can a jade pendant run away?

(One)

When someone wants to go, there are a lot of things he does not need to bring; even his ears, nose, eyes, and arms he can leave behind, but he simply must bring his two legs along.

With no legs, how can he go?

This time naturally Gong Ping also had to take her legs along. However, the situation was a bit different. This time, even if she did not bring her legs, she would still be able to go.

Because she was being carried away by Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng definitely would not leave her legs behind. He could have cared less if the rest of her body was left behind, but he absolutely must take this pair of legs along.

For some women, their legs are more important than their heads. Although head is the most important body part, although on the head there are brains, face, eyes, nose, mouth and ears, in some women's view, the most valuable part of her entire body was not the head.

(Two)

Gong Ping clamped her legs tight; she was determined to protect this

place at all cost, she would rather die than to let others violate this place, she would rather die than to let others take off her pants.

Too bad she already knew that the strength she could still use was not much.

Because by the time she heard her imperial lady said 'This way' [see Chapter 7, original Chinese has six characters 'jiu shi zhe zhong fa zi'], she found out that four or five of her acupoints, although not vital acupoints, but could cause unbearable pain, were already under Lu Xiaofeng's control.

To a woman like her, suddenly losing the power to fight back was a matter that was extremely difficult to accept.

In fact, when she heard the first two words 'jiu shi', she was already under his control. By the time 'zhe zhong fa zi', four words were spoken, her body was already perched on Lu Xiaofeng's shoulder.

At that time, she felt as though she was sitting on a real phoenix, fluttering and soaring through the ninth heaven.

She had heard people say that in Jianghu, the person with the best qinggong was the number one Divine Thief under the heavens, who was able to masquerade into any personality at any time, Sikong Zhaixing. She had also heard even more people say that Silver Fox of the Great Snowy Mountain, who enjoyed rising reputation in Jianghu recently, when he unleashed his unique school's qinggong on a snow-covered mountain range, he was able to cover a thousand li [1 li is approx. 1/2 km or 1/3 mile] in one stretch, without leaving any footprints. Even flying immortals

were no more than this.

Of course there were other people who said that Wudang's former famous character Wooden Taoist, Honest Monk who roamed the Jianghu, Hua Manlou whose eyes were blind but his heart was not, all had supreme qinggong skill, enough so that they could be considered Jianghu's experts.

Other than Ximen Chuixue, whose swordsmanship has reached 'divine' stage, so that basically he did not even have any need to fully unleash his qinggong anymore, there were at least thirteen people in Jianghu whose qinggong could be considered first class.

Naturally these legends were not unfounded.

But now Gong Ping knew that those legends, which she thought had a lot of basis behind them, were actually no more than that, a legend.

Because right now she already knew who had the number one qinggong in the world; furthermore, she had experienced it firsthand, not based on listening to other people's legend.

When Lu Xiaofeng was flying in the air, she felt as if she was soaring in the cloud or riding the fog. Breaking through the window's paper covering, flitting across the small courtyard, climbing over the twigs-gate, Gong Ping's feeling was just like that.

When her body moved swiftly, the sudden movement gave her the illusory feeling of loss of gravity; the blade-like cold wind assaulting her

face felt like needles penetrating her bones and marrow. All these feelings were enough to excite an exhilarating feeling in her heart.

A woman who originally was full of confidence of her own strength, suddenly losing all her power, it was like a sheep suddenly fell into a hungry wolf, which was the hands of this man; she was completely at his mercy.

Naturally this kind of situation was very tragic, but sometimes it would stimulate certain women that they are shaking with excitement.

Naturally speed was also some kind of stimulant.

Resting on Lu Xiaofeng's shoulder, riding along Lu Xiaofeng's flight, every single feeling Gong Ping experienced was a new and odd stimulus. Each stimulus could give rise to an urge, until in the end it was enough to arouse urges in even the most arrogant, stubborn, and conservative woman.

Each stimulus was enough to arouse her body's primal desire.

It was the kind of desire that usually women do not wish for other people to know; so much so that she herself refused to admit that she knew.

(Three)

Although Gong Ping was determined to keep her legs clamped tight, but even she herself could feel that her determination has collapsed.

She was already twenty-nine years old. She was already a very mature woman. Every single part of her body has fully developed, moreover, she was maturing very well.

Exactly because of this reason that oftentimes she used the most arduous way to temper herself, to exhaust her own physical strength.

Naturally she also took cold baths in very cold nights.

A twenty-year old woman, if she did not have a man, even though it was so easy for her to spend the days, once twilight started to settle, the curtain of the night began to go down, it would be very difficult for her to pass the day.

This condition actually started to plague a woman when she was just sixteen years old. By the time she was twenty-one, it was the end of a phase. When she was twenty-nine, it was another end of a phase. Thirty-five was another phase. By the time she was forty-five, all the phases have settled down.

If she did not have an understanding and sensitive man by her side, any phase would make a woman feel painful emptiness.

A woman's heart is indeed very difficult to fathom, it is really like searching for a needle at the bottom of the ocean. It was not merely men's opinion, even women themselves also had more or less the same idea.

Gong Ping had never thought that at a moment like this, she would think about such thing. She only felt an exhaustion spell that her mind drifted into a distant and indistinct state, creating a dream that she has not dreamed for a very long time.

When she awoke, she found out Lu Xiaofeng was staring at her with a very peculiar expression. She suddenly also realized that her face was burning hot.

Lu Xiaofeng laughed. A bit evil laugh. Gong Ping's face grew even hotter, her heartbeat also quickened. Have this evil man already seen through my thought?

What worried she more was: what did this evil want to do to her?

"Miss Gong, if you think that I am going to do something unruly to you, then you are wrong." Lu Xiaofeng smiled, "You must trust me, I am a man who has always followed rules."

At first Gong Ping was determined not to let this evil man speak, yet she simply could not control herself, "If you are really following rules, why did you kidnap me here?"

'Here' being a very warm and dark place, everywhere she looked, she did not see anybody else. The light was also very dim.

If a man wanted to take advantage of a woman, nothing could be better than this kind of place. In this kind of situation, any woman would feel really scared.

If it was only fear, it was not a big deal. The strange thing was: other than fear, there was also a bit of excitement and arousal.

Only a man who understands women very well would know how much excitement this kind of situation would bring.

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng laughed again.

"Miss Gong, when I first saw you, I felt that there is really nothing great about you. But the more I see you, I always feel that each time you look different than the previous time. The more I see you, the more I feel that you are lovely." Lu Xiaofeng said, "And I believe Mr. Liu must have shared my opinion."

"Who is Mr. Liu?"

"Right now Mr. Liu is nothing but a dead man, but when he was alive, he was a very remarkable man," Lu Xiaofeng said.

"He was a very remarkable man?"

"At least he would not have stabbed to death head-on in a dark alley; unless the killer was someone that he was very fond of." Lu Xiaofeng said, "So much so that he even gave the jade pendant he always brought with him to her."

"When you said 'her', it seems to me that you are talking about a

woman."

"It does seem that way."

"And the woman you are talking about, it seems to be me."

"It does seem that way."

"And the jade pendant you are talking about, it seems to be the piece that just fell from my body a moment ago."

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "Miss Gong, it's not that I am complimenting you, but you are indeed a lot smarter than I thought."

Gong Ping also sighed. "Lu Shaoye [young master], it's not that I do not want to compliment you, but you are indeed a lot more stupid than I thought."

Erotic fantasy has always been easy to cool off and disappear, because it always comes quick, it also goes away fast.

Gong Ping's voice and demeanor have already become very cold.

"I know that the Mr. Liu you were talking about was Liu Chengfeng, and you must thought that this jade pendant was given to me by him, therefore, he and I must have very close relationship, therefore, he could not possibly guard against me, therefore, I would be able to use my usual short dagger to kill him in dark alleys every day."

She asked Lu Xiaofeng, "Isn't that what you are thinking?"

"Yes."

"And because of that you kidnapped me and brought me to this place, as a result I found out that you are an idiot."

"Oh?"

"If I really did kill Liu Chengfeng, why would I wear his jade pendant on me? Could it be that I was afraid you may not know that I was the assassin who murdered your good friend?"

Lu Xiaofeng was speechless. What Gong Ping said was not completely unfounded. But the jade pendant that Liu Chengfeng used to wear was clearly in her possession.

"Alright, I admit, I am an idiot. But can you tell me, how did this jade pendant from Liu Chengfeng's body run away to you?"

"You are wrong again." With a tone that showed that she had gained the upper hand she said, "How can a jade pendant run away?"

Lu Xiaofeng could only force a laughter; naturally jade pendant cannot run away. "Then how did his jade pendant end up on your body?"

"Naturally there is a reason behind it."

"What reason?"

"Since the jade pendant cannot run away, and I can't possibly steal it, then where did it come from?" Gong Ping said, "Actually, you ought to understand; as long as you think harder, it should be clear to you."

"Oh?"

"A lovely woman oftentimes has something of unknown origin, do you know the reason?"

Gong Ping answered her own question, "Because there are a lot of men, although they are miserly and stingy, who when you ask him to treat you to dinner would act as if you are asking for his life, but when he came across a woman that he likes, even if that woman asks for his life, he would gladly give it to her."

"I know what you mean." Lu Xiaofeng said, "This jade pendant must be given to you as a gift."

"Men giving gifts to women, it has always been the heaven's will and the earth's intention." Coldly and indifferently Gong Ping said, "I agreed to receive his gift, he was already very happy as hell."

"Right, right, right! Right, right, right! There are indeed a lot of men in the world who are just like that." Lu Xiaofeng said, "I just want to know, who was the man who gave this jade pendant to you?"

"You cannot know who he is."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to tell you."

Not only Lu Xiaofeng did not act like he was about to force a confession from her, he did not show even the slightest sign of anger. "I understand, you don't want to tell me, it's because you are not willing, and you are not happy." He asked Gong Ping, "Is that right?"

"Right."

If a woman uses this kind of response to refuse a man, most men could only look at her helplessly.

Gong Ping said, "The biggest reason cannot compare to this word, 'happy'. If a woman really does not want to do something, nobody can do anything to her."

"You are wrong." Lu Xiaofeng said, "Since there are such unreasonable women in the world, there are also men who specialize in dealing with that kind of women."

With a very pleased and proud look on his face he pointed to his own nose, "For example, I am such a man."

"You?" with a cold laugh Gong Ping said, "What can you do to me?"

"Naturally I can't do anything to you. At most I can only take your pants off of you."

It was an old trick, plus it was a bit vulgar, yet when used against women, it was 'ten thousand tries, ten thousand successes'; it doesn't matter what kind of woman.

Gong Ping's countenance already changed, but she still put up a cold look, "You don't have to scare me, I won't be intimidated by you."

"Oh?"

"No matter what, at least you are a man who still wants to save your face; how could you do such thing?"

She wanted to persuade Lu Xiaofeng using reasonable words; who would have thought that Lu Xiaofeng's words were a lot more reasonable than hers?

"So what's wrong with such thing?" In deadly earnest he asked Gong Ping, "If you are a physician, and you want to examine the wound on someone's leg, won't you take his pants off first?" The obvious answer to this question was 'definitely'.

"So do I," Lu Xiaofeng said, "If I don't take your pants off, how can I look at your legs?"

Gong Ping suppressed her anger. She must use up all her power to suppress her anger. "But you are not a physician." She said to Lu Xiaofeng.

"I am not."

"Since you are not a physician, and my legs are not hurt, what gives you right to look at my legs?"

Lu Xiaofeng smiled sadly and shook his head, as if a little child has just asked him a very childish question. He asked Gong Ping back, "I didn't say that only physicians have the right to look at other people's legs, did I?"

He did not say such thing; furthermore, he would never say something like, "So let me ask you, did I say that someone must be injured first before he can let others see his legs?"

He did not say such thing either, "Therefore, you ought to understand by now, that when a man wants to look at a woman's legs, basically he does not need any reason."

Lu Xiaofeng cheerfully said, "Fortunately, I am not that kind of man without reason."

Practically Gong Ping nearly went mad of anger; she clenched her teeth and stared at him for half a day, still she could not resist asking, "Alright, let me ask you then, what reason do you have?"

Lu Xiaofeng's manners suddenly turned very solemn, "I must find the

murderer who killed Liu Chengfeng. Too bad that so far, I only found two clues: this jade pendant is one, the other clue is a pair of woman's legs."

He, of course, had to explain, "Because of this, I nearly lost my life yesterday, lost at the hands of a woman." Lu Xiaofeng said, "Her face can be easily changed, so practically other people cannot tell her true identity, but unintentionally she let me see her legs."

"And now, can you still recognize those legs?"

"Of course I can," Lu Xiaofeng said. "A leg like that, as long as a man took a glance, he would never forget, especially a man with experience like me."

His eyes started to stare at Gong Ping's legs again, as if the pair of legs was completely naked.

"Since you are unwilling to tell me the origin of the jade pendant, I have no choice but to look at your legs." He asked Gong Ping, "If I did not take your pants off, how could I see your legs?"

Gong Ping did not say anything. Right now she already understood that this seemingly deranged Lu Xiaofeng was actually not a madman, and he was not drunk either; he was not a sex maniac, and he was not joking either. What he was talking about was a murder, concerning a man's life, not only he was an unusually important man, he was also his good friend.

In this kind of situation, once a man like Lu Xiaofeng found a little bit of clue, he would never let go. All along Lu Xiaofeng has been watching the

expression on her face, and now he suddenly said, "If you know what I mean, you ought to know that you simply have to take off your pants."

Surprisingly, this time Gong Ping did not get angry, she did not any sign of becoming hostile either; she said instead, "That's right, I know what you mean. If you are not Lu Xiaofeng, I am afraid my trousers would have been taken off early on."

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbstruck, he did not seem to believe that those words have just come out from this woman's mouth.

Naturally Gong Ping could also see that his expression was different from what it was a moment ago; therefore, she could not bear not to ask, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because, I really could not believe that you are a woman with reason."

Gong Ping smiled sweetly, "Not all women are without reason." She told Lu Xiaofeng, "As long as you are speaking reasonably, I am absolutely convinced.

"That is wonderful, truly wonderful."

Lu Xiaofeng was really delighted to be able to find a woman with reason in the world; it was indeed a delightful matter.

Therefore, he sincerely said to Gong Ping, "If you can help me finding Liu Chengfeng's assassin, I will be forever grateful to you."

"I know."

Naturally Lu Xiaofeng immediately asked her, "The jade pendant in your possession, where did it come from?"

Not even in his dream he would imagine that Gong Ping's answer would be the same as her previous answer. She still said, "I don't want to tell you. And I can't tell you."

Lu Xiaofeng cried out, "But you have agreed to help me just now."

"Correct, I did say that, and I am surely will do it."

Using a voice that was as graceful as the imperial lady, Gong Ping said to Lu Xiaofeng, "Things have come to this, it seems to me that I will have to let you take my pants off."

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbstruck again. He suddenly discovered that this woman was not the same woman he first met. In this short period of time, she seemed to change seventy, eighty times already. Sometimes she turned into a crafty and unruly woman, sometimes very argumentative, sometimes she looked like an annoying old granny, sometimes she looked like a little fox.

The first time Lu Xiaofeng saw her, he felt that no part of this woman was attractive to him, he only felt that the biggest strong point this woman possessed was to 'fix' a man, hence any man who saw her ought to spur the horse to full speed, to escape without a trace without delay.

But now Lu Xiaofeng's perception was completely changed. If, in a very short period of time a woman was able to change herself many times, plus she was able to completely change a man like Lu Xiaofeng's perception toward her, what kind of woman was she, exactly?

Later on Lu Xiaofeng told his friends, "All of you have never seen her, hence I can guarantee that you will never guess what kind of woman she is."

This woman was a bit different than other women; perhaps even more than a bit different.

With a tone that sounded as if she understood Lu Xiaofeng's pain she said, "Lu Xiaofeng, I know that you have been world famous since ten years ago. Other than your qinggong and those two fingers of yours, your reputation with women has been acclaimed much and criticized a little." Gong Ping said, "Because everybody thought that you are a man who understood women very well." She sighed and went on, "But now I know that the degree of your understanding of women is not much different than ordinary men."

Lu Xiaofeng's four eyebrows appeared to be a bit sticking out vertically; describing his appearance right now using the phrase 'boasting mustache glowering eyes' would not be considered excessive.

If he had become like that, the reason cannot be overemphasized. In all his life, he had never had any woman say something like that in front of him.

Yet Gong Ping plainly went on, "I know that certainly you'd refuse to accept it; a veteran of a hundred battles like Lu Xiaofeng, how could he not understand women?"

Her voice suddenly became very sympathetic, "But toward women, you really do not have any understanding. I am not deceiving you. Otherwise, you would not have done something like this to me."

Lu Xiaofeng could not refrain from asking her, "What did I do to you?"

Any man would not be able to refute what Gong Ping said next; she said, "When even with a dead threat I was unwilling to let you take my pants off, with thousand ways, a hundred plans you convinced me that you definitely must take my pants off." Gong Ping went on, "I was convinced. Because I am a woman with reason. And I felt that you have spoken reasonably."

Lu Xiaofeng seemed to hear his own mumbling reply, "I am indeed a very reasonable man."

"Therefore, I am now willingly letting you take off my pants, yet you want to forget this matter instead."

Gong Ping imitated Lu Xiaofeng earlier; she smiled sadly and shook her head, "Tell me, what do you want?" She asked Lu Xiaofeng, "Have you ever thought that to a woman, this is a great insult?"

This is also a fact that no man could ever refute.

What he ought to do he could not do, what he ought not do he must do instead; what is this all about?

When a woman spoke to a man like that, it was tantamount to giving him a big slap on the face.

The strange thing is: not only Lu Xiaofeng's expression did not seem like he had just taken a big slap on the face, he looked very happy instead, "Thank you." He said to Gong Ping, "You are really adorable, I really have to thank you."

Gong Ping was baffled by this sudden change of attitude; therefore, she could not help asking either, "What do you mean? Why do you thank me?"

"Because all along you have been encouraging me."

"I encouraged you?" Gong Ping asked, "How did I encourage you?"

"You encouraged me to free your legs from inside your pants."

What kind of crap was that? It was basically 'Wu Dalang knocked on the door, the cuckold has come home'.^[1]

But the real meaning of what he said could be understood by anybody; besides, no matter what, those words were at least more elegant than saying 'I want to take off your pants'.

To be able to say something vulgar in a very elegant manner also required some kind of great deal of knowledge.

“Actually, I am not the kind of man who would do such thing, even you yourself admitted that I am a man who wants to save my face very much.” Lu Xiaofeng said, “But since now you are encouraging me, the situation is of course different.”

His hand had started moving to do that ‘different’ thing.

In this kind of ‘different’ situation, every woman would feel a bit ‘different’; maybe even more than a bit.

And now they have come to a definitely delicate and dangerous time; in this kind of situation, anything could happen. Anything that anybody could imagine, it could happen anytime.

Can you imagine what could happen in this kind of situation? If you are someone who have rich and powerful imagination, when you are thinking about this kind of situation, you will definitely feel very excited.

But I am sure that you will not think of what kind of place Lu Xiaofeng and Gong Ping were at this moment.

Because you will certainly think that two people like them, no matter where they are, it does not make any difference. No matter where they are, they could have been done the same thing.

Therefore, the place is not an important factor. The important thing is,

what did they actually do? What was the outcome?

They did not do anything. Lu Xiaofeng only touched Gong Ping's belt, and then he could not do anything else.

Because right that moment, he heard someone spoke from the outside, "She cannot tell you where she got the jade pendant from, because the person giving that jade pendant to her was me."

'Me', who was it?

"By this time, I believe you must have found out who I am." The person said, "Even though you have not seen me now, you ought to have recognized my voice."

Lu Xiaofeng could not deny. Under any circumstances, he would be able to recognize this voice.

Because her voice was gentle, noble and graceful. As long as a man heard this voice once, he would not forget. Just like that pair of long, straight, firm and elastic legs, once a man saw it, he would never forget.

The jade pendant that Liu Chengfeng always carried with him ended up in Gong Ping's possession. The person who gave it to her was precisely the exiled wife of the king.

The term 'Gongzhu' [lit. master of the palace] was no more than an appellation, there was no palace in this place. How can there be a palace in a place where the birds do not lay eggs like this? And if there is no

palace, how can there be any 'Gongzhu'.

Yet 'prince's concubine' was real.

What was the relationship between a real 'king's wife' and Liu Chengfeng, a wanderer who roamed to the ends of the earth, who was here today and gone tomorrow, whose real identity was closer to a myth?

If there was any relationship between them, how did this relationship happen?

Nobody knew the answer to these questions. It's just that Lu Xiaofeng finally know one thing.

Gong Ping adamantly refused to tell the jade pendant's origin, it was only to protect her imperial lady. She did not want her imperial lady to be implicated in this murder case. No doubt between the two of them, there was some kind of 'different' relationship.

As to what kind of relationship it was, not only Lu Xiaofeng did not want to ask, he simply did not even want to think about it.

People who always love to expose other people's private business are just like dogs who love to eat sh1t. Nobody knows which one of these people always love to pry other people's personal matters, precisely like nobody knows which dog always love to eat sh1t.

These kinds of people and these kinds of dogs were the kind that Lu Xiaofeng detested bitterly; therefore, he simply asked one thing, "Where

exactly did this jade pendant come from?"

He only asked this one question, because it was the murder case's crucial point.

It's not that Gong Susu refused to answer this question, it's just that her answer was something that Lu Xiaofeng had never expected.

Unexpectedly, Gong Susu's answer was identical to Gong Ping's answer a moment ago, "It's inevitable that woman has something of unknown origin." She said, "Naturally these things were given by men." She even had the same emphasis as Gong Ping did, "Men picking gifts for women, it has always been the heaven's will and the earth's intention. Even for a man like you, sometimes it is hard to avoid giving something to a woman."

Lu Xiaofeng could only laugh wryly.

Naturally he could give gifts. Not he could give gifts, in fact, he often did. He could give a woman anything. Only one thing he would never give.

He would never give anybody something that belonged to a dead person. Especially if the dead person died in his hands.

If he gave this kind of thing to a lovely woman, not only it was rude, it was also disgraceful.

If he gave this kind of thing to an annoying woman, it would be

extremely stupid.

Just how many women in the world are able to keep secret? Any man with experience ought to understand this fact. The person who killed Liu Chengfeng was definitely someone with experience.

If this jade pendant was not given by him, then Gong Susu was lying.

This seemed to be as simple as one plus one equal to two.

Lu Xiaofeng very rarely exposed a woman's lies, but today he really wanted to make exception just once. Unexpectedly, what Gong Susu said next shut his mouth.

"Actually, even if you did not ask, I should have told you that this jade pendant was a gift which Liu Chengfeng personally gave me," Gong Susu said.

"Oh?"

"When he arrived here, he already knew my origin, that day also happened to be my birthday, hence he sent some presents for me. In turn, I also invited him to drink a bit of wine."

Gong Susu smiled at Lu Xiaofeng, "Anyone who came to me for the first time, usually brought a little bit of gift for me. There seems to be very few exceptions."

Not only Lu Xiaofeng was rendered speechless, his face also blushed. Not only he came to her house to eat without bringing any gift, he also kidnapped someone from her household. Even someone who can be considered as having the thickest skin on his face would feel a bit embarrassed. Fortunately, this someone was going to rescue him from embarrassment, because Gong Ping seemed to want to say a few good words on his behalf.

Unfortunately, Gong Ping did not have any chance to speak up, because right this moment, from the outside dozens of cold rays broke through the window and flew in with different level of strengths, aimed at different places, came from different angles, separately attacking a dozen or so different vital points on her body.

In term of shininess and shape, these secret projectiles were different from each other. The situation was almost identical to the attack to Zhao Xiazhi in his coffin shop the other day.

The only difference was that Gong Ping's situation was more dangerous. She had fallen under his control, and she was unable to move at all.

Fortunately, there was one more commonality between the two situations, both had Lu Xiaofeng by their sides.

Gong Ping also knew that Lu Xiaofeng would never let her die. But even she could not imagine how Lu Xiaofeng was going to save her.

She only felt a very strong wind rolling over from her side, and she seemed to see this wind actually came from a very strange looking

flexible weapon. She did not see the weapon, but she knew that this weapon was very effective.

From the extremely sharp noise of the projectiles splitting the air, there seemed to be about thirteen, fourteen secret projectiles shooting in from outside the window that were either rolled in or struck down by this flexible weapon. As for the remaining two or three projectiles, she only saw Lu Xiaofeng stretching out his two fingers and pinching the air like he was pinching houseflies. Soon all secret projectiles were caught between his fingers.

And then she heard Lu Xiaofeng's cold laugh, "Indeed the old trick from the coffin shop, playing with a bunch of broken copper and rusty iron."

Gong Ping did not understand; hence she asked, "You know who's plotting against me?"

"Probably a little."

"Are they the same two people who plotted against Zhao Xiazi?"

"Probably they are."

"You have been tracking their whereabouts, since this time they appeared again, why didn't you go out and pursue them?"

Gong Ping's question was very reasonable. Anybody would wonder about the same thing.

Lu Xiaofeng should have had good answer. The strange thing is, he only replied indifferently, "Even if I did, it would be too late anyway."

This answer could be considered very reasonable as well, but it did not seem to be something that would come out of Lu Xiaofeng's mouth.

Lu Xiaofeng was definitely not such a person.

Knowing that something was clearly impossible, he would still do it. He lost track of how many times he had done such things. Question is: what stopped him this time?

Gong Ping did not pursue. Suddenly her eyes grew wide and she said shockingly, "What ... what's that in your hand?"

Naturally she has recognized the object in Lu Xiaofeng's hand; how could a woman not recognize her own belt?

It was as if Lu Xiaofeng has suddenly turned into an idiot; he still explained to her, "This is a silk belt, it was wrapped around your waist just now."

Gong Ping also seemed like she has turned into an idiot as well, she looked as if she had just figured out that the odd-looking flexible weapon that rolled in the secret projectiles was this belt; therefore, her face turned beet-red.

Lu Xiaofeng's face also seemed to blush a little bit.

No matter what, he had just taken this belt off of her. Regardless of the reason, this thing had really happened; ever wonder how these two felt in their hearts?

Who could have thought that Gong Ping picked this exact moment to cry out, because she suddenly realized that there was one less person in the room? "Where's Gongzhu?"

"She seems to have left."

"When did she leave?"

"Just now."

"Just now when?"

"Just when ..." Lu Xiaofeng looked at the belt in his hand, "Just that time."

This answer seemed vague, but it was very clear that he meant when the belt was taken off of her, that is, the split second when Gong Ping's life and death was at stake.

"Did you see her leaving?" Gong Ping asked.

"Um ..."

"Do you know why she had to leave?"

With a bitter laugh Lu Xiaofeng said, "Why did you ask me this question? How do I know?"

Gong Ping sighed gently, "Of course you don't know, but I do." She looked at Lu Xiaofeng; her gaze suddenly became strangely gentle. After a long, long time she finally said with a tender voice, "Now I know everything."

What did Gong Ping know?

(Four)

Not only Gong Ping was not stupid, she was actually very intelligent. Therefore, what she knew was actually a lot more than Lu Xiaofeng could ever imagine.

"You did not go after the people who were plotting against me, it was because you wanted to protect me. Not only because you were afraid they might come back and strike again, you were also afraid that someone else might harm me."

"Who's this someone else?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"That someone else is naturally the one who has been treating me very

well all these years, Gong Susu." Gong Ping said, "At least I always thought that she treated me very well."

"How could she harm you?"

Gong Ping sighed again, "I know you are deliberately asking me." She said, "What you know ought to be a lot more than what I know."

Lu Xiaofeng neither deny nor confirm. Therefore, Gong Ping could only continue, "At first I also thought that she could not possibly harm me; but now ..."

Gong Ping hesitated for a long time before continuing, "And now I even suspect that the people who plotted against me just now might be related to her; it is even possible that they are actually assassins whom she hired."

"Do you think she has a reason to kill you?"

"I do."

"What's the reason?"

"I am the only one who knows the person who gave that jade pendant to her." Gong Ping said, "That's why she wanted to kill me to shut my mouth."

Only dead people can keep a secret. From the ancient time, it was one

of the strongest motivations for mankind to kill other people.

Lu Xiaofeng still had a little bit of doubt. "Since she knew that it was highly possible that this piece of jade pendant would become the most important clue to the murder case, why did she give it to you?"

Gong Ping's answer was clear-cut and reasonable. "First, at that time she never expected that someone would make light of traveling a thousand li to come here and investigate this murder case; even more unexpected was that the person happened to be you."

She said, "Secondly, because she knew this piece of jade pendant was taken from a dead person, this is an inauspicious object. Coincidentally, when I saw it, I expressed my interest, hence she happily did this favor, which did not cost her anything."

Gong Ping said, "From this point, it is even clearer that not only she knew the origin of this jade pendant, she also has an unusually close relationship with the person who murdered Liu Chengfeng."

Only one question left: Where did this jade pendant come from?

Things have come to this, it's only natural that the answer to this question would come very soon.

Gong Ping said, "Naturally Liu Chengfeng did not personally give this jade pendant to her; when he died, he still had the jade pendant on him."

"So who gave the jade pendant to her then?"

"It was Sha Dahu."

Who would have thought that Jin Qiliang was a very honest man? It was the second time Lu Xiaofeng found the proof that he was telling the truth.

Those super-scoundrels Big Boss Sha provided shelter for, indeed not one of them was useful, otherwise, Lu Xiaofeng wanting to enter Big Boss Sha's personal chamber would not be an easy matter.

Yet right now he was able to get in and out freely, as if he was entering a no-man's land. Even if he wanted to sleep in Big Boss Sha's bed, it would not be a difficult thing.

However, our Mr. Lu Xiaofeng was a gentleman; at least he was a lot more of a gentleman than most people who pretend to be gentlemen.

At least he still knew a little bit of courtesy, at least he understood that before entering someone else's private chamber, he ought to knock first.

Much less from Big Boss Sha's bedroom he seemed to hear the heavy breathing of a man and a woman.

Speaking about a man like Lu Xiaofeng, this kind of heavy breathing was not unfamiliar to him.

Speaking about a man like Big Boss Sha, it would be strange if this kind of heavy breathing was not heard from his bedroom.

Therefore, Lu Xiaofeng stood waiting outside the door for half a day. He waited until the heavy breathing subsided before he started knocking the door.

He only knocked twice, from inside the bedroom Big Boss Sha already started swearing; he yelled all kinds of cussing words, the finale was of course, "Get lost! I don't care who you are, I don't care what you want, you'd better get lost quickly, or else I'll pinch your egg yolk out of you."

Lu Xiaofeng did not get lost; he still knocked the door, 'knock, knock, knock', rhythmically, it was very nice rhythm too.

The bedroom door suddenly flung open, a stark naked Big Boss Sha suddenly appeared from behind the door.

Nobody could describe his expression this very moment. But I believe there are a lot of people would be able to imagine it. Even if they did not see it, they ought to be able to imagine it.

Lu Xiaofeng did not wish to imagine, yet he did not wish to look either. He only bowed with the most refined manners and smiled, "My apology." He said, "I am truly sorry, but I swear to God that it was not my intention to disturb you."

Big Boss Sha's mouth suddenly looked like a mouthful of dog poo had just been stuffed inside. Although he was thinking of spitting it all out toward Lu Xiaofeng's face, truth be told, he was a bit afraid.

"Awfully sorry still, I am not a chicken egg, neither am I a duck egg; therefore, I don't have any egg yolks to be pinched out by you." Lu Xiaofeng said, "I am coming here, just so I can ask you a question."

Big Boss Sha was finally able to spit out three words out of his mouth, "What's the matter?"

Lu Xiaofeng held out his hand, in between his two fingers, which fame has shaken the world, there was a piece of red cord, from the red cord dangled a piece of jade pendant, which color and luster, as well as its shape, was very nice.

"I just want to ask you: have you seen such thing before?"

Big Boss Sha's response shocked Lu Xiaofeng; because without even thinking he replied, "Of course I have; moreover, it was me who presented it to Gongzhu Su Yun as a token of my respect."

Lu Xiaofeng was dumbstruck.

For him, this was supposed to be a very important clue, a very crucial point, concerning a very mysterious murder case. Who would have thought that without even thinking Big Boss Sha just admitted it out? Furthermore, he did not seem to have the least bit of panicky expression on his face.

But inevitably there was more than a bit of angry look on his face. He was practically so angry that his face looked like a stove ready to burst flames.

"If you burst in here in the middle of the night just to ask that question, let me tell you this: I don't care who you are, I am afraid you'll have a very difficult time getting out of here still intact."

With a bitter smile Lu Xiaofeng sighed, "In that case, I have no choice but to ask you something else."

"What is it?"

"Was this jade pendant originally yours?"

Surprisingly, Big Boss Sha did not hesitate at all, he answered, "No. The gift I give to someone, oftentimes I also receive it as a gift from someone else." He glowered at Lu Xiaofeng, "Are you going to ask, who gave this to me?"

"Yes."

"If I don't tell you, what are you going to do?"

Lu Xiaofeng sighed. "In that case, I am afraid it will be very bad." Striking the calmest attitude he told Big Boss Sha, "If I let go right now, this jade pendant will immediately fall to the ground. By the time I finish speaking, I am going to let this go."

"So what?"

“Nothing much.” Lu Xiaofeng let the jade pendant swing like a pendulum, “It’s just that by the time this jade pendant reaches the floor, I guarantee you will become a dead person.”

Lu Xiaofeng has rarely used such words to intimidate others. If he did say such thing, he was not trying to intimidate anybody.

Naturally Big Boss Sha knew about this fact. His countenance has already changed. The jade pendant has also left Lu Xiaofeng’s hand.

Right this moment, the situation suddenly changed dramatically. Lu Xiaofeng suddenly heard a woman’s voice, “I gave that jade pendant to him.”

A woman, stark naked, jumped out of Big Boss Sha’s bedroom. With arms akimbo she stood in front of Lu Xiaofeng.

“It was given to me by my husband. I can give it to whoever I like to give. Other than that cuckold husband of mine, nobody has any right to interfere. Even if I stole it, it’s none of anybody else’s business.”

She shot a sidelong coquettish glance toward Lu Xiaofeng. “Lu Xiaofeng, Lu Daxia, Lu Gongzi, what do you say? Don’t you agree? Is it your business?”

Before she even finished speaking, Lu Xiaofeng already walked away, and disappeared in an instant, as if he suddenly saw a demon.

[1] Wu Dalang (Chinese: 武大郎) is a major character in the Chinese classic novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, and a minor character in the

Water Margin, another classic. In both novels he is murdered by his adulterous wife Pan Jinlian. A well-known figure in Chinese culture, he represents the quintessential cuckold. (Wikipedia)

Chapter 9 – What a fast blade

(One)

When Lu Xiaofeng found Wang Dayan, this grocery store boss, whose green hat[1] was as big as the mountain, was already as drunk as mud, so that his body was covered in vomit, his shoes were covered in mud. Yet he was lying in bed, sleeping soundly. The stench in his room was enough to kill people on the entire street.

Such a good-for-nothing, careless person, how could he be a murderer? How could he kill Liu Chengfeng, a famous Jianghu hero?

There is no way Lu Xiaofeng could believe it.

Yet the lady boss, who came out stark naked from someone else's bedroom, said that the jade pendant was given by her 'husband'. Hence Lu Xiaofeng simply must ask this boss.

No matter how many green hats the lady boss has given him, her 'husband' was, after all, only one.

To wake a drunk-like-a-pig man up, the best way was to fetch a bucket of cold water and pour it on this head. Especially in this kind of weather. This method was guaranteed to work.

But in all honestly, Lu Xiaofeng did not have the heart to do it. He also knew that pitiful people are not beyond doing repulsive things, but

whenever he came across pitiful people, his heart always turned especially soft.

Therefore, he spent a lot of time and wasting a lot of efforts before Big Master Wang finally woke up.

At first he was thinking of waiting a bit longer until he was a bit more sober before he could ask about the origin of the jade pendant. Who would have thought that as soon as Wang Dayan saw the jade pendant, he cried out, "I gave that to my wife, how did it end up in your hands? You'd better tell me quickly, where did you get it?"

Lu Xiaofeng could only let out a bitter laugh.

He simply had no way of explaining, and he did not want to explain it. Therefore, he could only take a rather simple way, a way that he rarely used in dealing with pitiful people. This way was very effective in making people tell the truth.

Sure enough, Wang Dayan quickly confessed the origin of the jade pendant. "I spent the whole three taels to buy it."

"Who sold it to you?"

"Who else but that little b@stard?" Wang Dayan went on, "Usually that little b@stard was poor as hell, but as soon as Liu Daye [big master] died, he became rich. I always suspect that he is 'seeing riches provokes evil designs', that he 'plot and kill someone for his property'."

Whether what he said was the truth or not, Lu Xiaofeng must find the little beggar to confirm. Besides, the trail has been investigated to this point, very soon it would reach the end, if he continued chasing the trail, he might find the main threads.

Therefore, the little beggar must be found.

Wang Dayan volunteered to take Lu Xiaofeng looking for him. "The places where that little b@stard usually stays, nobody knew it better than I do. Allow me."

But he did not find him. They went to seven, eight places, still he was not found.

This little b@stard seemed to have vanished.

(Two)

How could someone suddenly disappear?

Was it because someone wanted to make him the scapegoat, therefore, they killed him and destroy his body to eradicate any trace? Or was it because he knew that all clues had pointed to him, hence he had no choice but to disappear without any trace?

Lu Xiaofeng was not sure.

Up to now, he had not had any hard evidence, he had not been able to

find anybody to corroborate his findings.

Lu Xiaofeng had never made any careless decision, even if he knew for sure that someone was the murderer, before he found hard evidence, he would not make any move.

In any case, he was unwilling to indict an innocent.

There were a lot of people in Jianghu who said that he had a lot of similarity with Fragrant Commander Chu [i.e. Chu Liuxiang] of the past, who had become a legend while he was still alive. Actually, the similarities between them were not many.

Practically, the two of them were two completely different persons.

Chu Liuxiang was elegant, temperate and refined, Lu Xiaofeng was wild and jumpy; the two basically had totally different personalities, naturally the way they worked was also completely different.

Only in one area these two were exactly the same.

Both were rational men, they never expose other people's private affair, they never make rash decision, never wronged the innocents. Therefore, all their lives they had a clear conscience, because they were able to look into their own hearts and find no shame.

In any case, the little beggar has become one of the suspects in this murder case.

If even someone like him could be a murderer, who in this little town can be trusted?

However, in this little town, nobody had either the motivation or justification in murdering Liu Chengfeng; even more, nobody had the ability to do so.

They all grew up here, in all their lives they had never left this place, they had never seen Liu Chengfeng before.

Except maybe one person. Gong Susu.

Thinking about Gong Susu, he remembered Gong Ping. Immediately Lu Xiaofeng became very nervous.

When Gong Ping and he parted, he was a bit worried. She insisted on coming back to look for Gong Susu, while he must follow the trail of the jade pendant. He had no reason to stop her.

At that time he was already worried, because he had a feeling that Gong Susu was a very dangerous person.

So now he decided to look for Gong Susu.

(Three)

Looking for people is a very strange business. Sometimes you are not

looking for someone, yet he always appears in front of you anytime, anywhere. But when you are looking for him, you simply cannot find him.

The situation this time was similar.

When Lu Xiaofeng arrived at Gong Susu's residence, the place was already deserted. Not a shadow was to be seen. Not only Gong Susu was not there, Gong Ping was not there either; even the white-haired old granny who answered the door was gone.

The house was originally decorated very elegantly and was very clean, but now everything was in disarray, as if there were seventy, eighty monkeys had just filled the house and somersaulted everywhere.

Lu Xiaofeng's heart sank, but his eyes suddenly lit up.

He saw something. Although the house was a complete mess, this thing was very striking to his eyes.

Lu Xiaofeng saw a clump of hair.

A clump of disheveled hair tied with a piece of sackcloth. The original color of the sackcloth was brownish yellow, but now it has turned to almost black, perhaps because it had been used for a long time and had never been replaced.

The hair was originally black, but now it has turned to brownish yellow because of dust, mud, grease, and sandy soil. It seemed that the last time the hair was washed was a lifetime ago.

Lu Xiaofeng recognized the hair. This clump of hair ought to be on the little beggar's head, but now it lay between the shattered flower vase and the crystal lampshade that had not been broken.

Although the clump of hair was disheveled, the cut end was very neat.

Naturally a clump of hair would not fall randomly from someone's head.

Undoubtedly it was cut by a blade and fell down.

Lu Xiaofeng picked up the hair and fixed his gaze on the cut end. Suddenly the pupil of his eyes narrowed.

"What a fast blade."

Such a fast blade, was it fast enough to pierce Liu Chengfeng's heart in one stab?

Whose blade was it?

(Four)

Have the little beggar been to Gong Susu's place? Someone of unknown sex, age, and identity cut his mane with one swipe of the blade, and then nobody knew his life or death, as well as his whereabouts.

Gong Ping and Gong Susu's fate was equally unclear. Just what had happened here, other than the three of them, nobody knew.

With the little beggar's mane in his hand, Lu Xiaofeng just stood there with a blank stare for half a day. All of sudden he remembered something else.

Not three people, but four.

Other than Gong Ping, Gong Susu and the little beggar, there was also the old woman with completely white hair. How come she was not seen either?

Such an old woman that she could not even straightened her back, could she be involved in this murder case?

Although Lu Xiaofeng asked himself all these questions, he knew that he would never find out the answer.

Right this moment, the pupil of his eyes suddenly narrowed again.

This time, he did not see anything striking, rather, he heard a sound that was as piercing to the ears as piercing to the eyes.

Actually, the sound Lu Xiaofeng heard could not be considered ear-piercing, because it was no more than a weak moan. But to his ears, it was more ear-piercing than the tip of a needle, because he could instantly recognize the sound as belonging to Gong Ping.

Gong Ping was still here? Why did she make such a painful sound? Was she hurt?

The only consolation was: as long as one could still make any noise, that means one is not dead yet.

Lu Xiaofeng took a very deep breath. He controlled his own heartbeat and breathing.

A quiet night.

He managed to control his own heartbeat and breathing until it barely made any noise. Therefore, by the time the second moan, which was as weak as an ordinary person's breathing, was heard, Lu Xiaofeng immediately knew the direction from which it came.

(Five)

The sky was very dark. Because it was the darkest time of the day, just before dawn arrived. Plus there was no star, no moon, and no lantern.

The originally bright and beautiful small courtyard, now it was as black as if ink was splashed all over it. He could see nothing.

But very quickly Lu Xiaofeng was able to find Gong Ping, in a place where no one else could find her.

By the wall at the back of the courtyard, there stood seven, eight big jars to raise goldfish.

Very few rich families in the Capital did not raise goldfish. It was one kind of habit, as well as a lifestyle. Although the flourish of the former days has passed like smoke, like a dream, some habit, some lifestyle, could not change.

Too bad in such a place where the birds don't lay eggs, where could one find goldfish? Where could one find water? Therefore, in our former imperial lady's courtyard, there was no other choice but to let this row of goldfish tanks stood empty.

Gong Ping was precisely inside the third empty goldfish tank from the left.

Naturally she did not voluntarily hide herself inside, nobody wanted to be stuffed inside a goldfish tank.

If she was able to fight back, she would not have been stuffed inside. Unfortunately, there were nine extra silver needles on her body, every single one was inserted into a very vital acupoint.

The darkest time has passed. The sky already began to show a bit of light. Under the faint light the silver needle glistened.

All four of Lu Xiaofeng's eyebrows seemed to frown.

He could see that these needles hit Gong Ping's vital acupoints using a

very-powerful secret projectile shooting technique.

The one shooting secret projectiles toward the coffin shop boss was undoubtedly also the same person.

It does not matter which era, such a secret projectile expert has always been rare.

Who was this person?

After the silver needle was pulled out, Gong Ping was able to speak, "I know you must be worried about me, but I am not worried at all, because I always thought Gong Susu would never do this to me." Gong Ping said, "I never thought, even in my dream, that Old Lady Xu would be able to subdue me in just one move."

"Who is Old Lady Xu?"

"It's the old granny who opened the door for you the other day."

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly remembered someone.

The Jianghu people who were able to execute such a formidable secret projectile technique to harm others, their number probably did not exceed ten. The number of women among them was no more than two or three. One of them was not only an expert in secret projectiles, she was also adept in changing her appearance, plus she was a divine thief. The 'Three-hand Goddess' Xu Ba. When she was still known as the 'Fairy'[2], her fame already shook both sides of the Yangtze River.

Could it be that the granny that was so old that she nearly withered away was the Fairy Xu of the olden days, whose skill was as divine as an immortal?

How did she end up in a place like this? How did she become a slave in an exiled imperial concubine's house? Based on both her reputation and her martial art skill, based on her standing and dignity in Jianghu, great majority of imperial concubines in the world were only fit to wash her feet.

Nobody would ever expect that someone whose seven vital acupoints were sealed, and was stuffed into a goldfish bowl would be rescued by someone else.

Gong Ping was supposed to be dead. Gong Susu did not kill her, she merely wanted her to suffer a bit of pain. But what about the little beggar?

Lu Xiaofeng asked Gong Ping, "Did you see the little beggar?"

Of course Gong Ping saw him. "But I have never expected that he was that kind of person; unexpectedly he took the risk to rescue me."

Lu Xiaofeng was clearly moved. He was silent for a long time before asking again, "Has he fallen under evil hands?"

Gong Ping sighed sadly, "Even if he is still alive right now, I am afraid he won't be alive for long."

"Why?"

"Because he seemed to know a secret that others do not wish him to know." Gong Ping said, "He seemed to have seen something that he is not supposed to see."

This 'something' and the secret must be closely related to Liu Chengfeng's death. Lu Xiaofeng had no doubt about it. Therefore, he did not ask further.

He only asked Gong Ping, "Where is the little beggar now?"

"He was caught and brought away. Gong Susu and Old Lady Xu caught him and brought him away."

"Why are they taking him away?" Lu Xiaofeng asked, "If they wanted to kill him to shut his mouth, why didn't they kill him right here?"

Gong Ping answered Lu Xiaofeng's question with a question, "If you want to kill someone, would you like him to die in your own house?"

"I won't."

"Having someone walk to another place on his own, isn't that a lot easier than dragging a dead body away?"

"Right."

Now naturally Lu Xiaofeng understood, Gong Susu brought the little beggar away, because she wanted to wipe out the body, wipe out the mouth, wipe out any evidence.

Naturally that place was somewhere other people would not be able to find, because nobody knew where it was.

Lu Xiaofeng did not know either.

He was able to do a lot of things that were impossible for others. He drank wine like drinking tea, he gambled with his life like gambling with cards, he could clamp other people's deadly weapons with his two fingers, as easy as a mischievous and romantic girl using her two fingers to pinch her sweetheart's nose, while facing life and death situation, he could still recite the jokes going around in this place, where the birds do not lay eggs, to the fullest extent.

But he was, after all, nothing more than a man; there are things that were beyond his ability to achieve.

He had never thought that a kite would give him such enlightenment.

In the cool, crisp breeze of the dawn, under the dim, pale crescent moon on the dark blue sky background, a kite was floating down.

It was quite a big kite, as big as a large eagle soaring above the snowy mountain and the peak of the mountain range.

Under the dim first glimmer of dawn, the kite suddenly flashed eight large characters that were written using bluish green phosphorous ink: 'To find the root of disaster, break the fish bowl'. [要找祸秧打破鱼缸]

These eight characters also looked like a joke from this birds-do-not-lay-eggs place.

[1] 'Wearing greet hat' means a cuckold, someone whose spouse is cheating on him/her.

[2] 'Goddess' and 'Fairy', orig. 仙姬 [xian ji] and 仙姑 [xian gu], 'xian' – immortal, 'ji' – woman (general term), usually refers to older or married women, 'gu' – aunt, the same 'gu' as in 'gu niang', Miss; usually refers to younger women.

Chapter 10 – Breaking gold fish bowl.

(One)

If it said 'To find the root [seed] of fish, break the fish bowl', it would make sense; even if not even a shadow of fish could be found inside the fish bowl.

But 'To find the root of disaster, break the fish bowl', the sentence was completely outrageous.

Yet making such a big kite was not an easy matter at all; and then writing those eight big characters in phosphorous ink would require not a few amount of phosphorous ink, and phosphorous ink was not very cheap.

Who would want to spend such big effort just to play a ridiculous joke to mock people without any benefit to self?

Not only Lu Xiaofeng did not show the slightest bit of sign that he was amused, his expression became very serious.

This joke was not a joke.

Immediately he went over to the goldfish jars, eight goldfish jars with similar size, shape, material, color and luster. They were also similar to the goldfish jars that he often saw in the Capital. The only difference was that these jars were as dry as the old granny's face, as if they were all wrinkly.

He carefully inspected all eight jars, inside and outside. Other than they were covered in sandy soil and dust, nothing was out of ordinary.

Gong Ping practically did not come over; she merely picked a stone from the ground, and threw it hard.

In a way, sometimes women were much more direct and effective than men.

'Bang!' a goldfish jar shattered into pieces.

When an empty goldfish jar shattered into pieces, what can you see? Oftentimes the only thing you discovered was that you should not have broken the goldfish jar in the first place.

Lu Xiaofeng let out a wry laugh. He shook his head, "Women are like that, they always thought that they are so smart and divinely brave. If there was any woman who is able to do something that men would admire, perhaps that woman was not a woman."

Gong Ping did not retort him, she did not even cast a single glance at him, as if she simply did not hear him at all. All along her attention was fixed at the goldfish jar that she had just broken.

What's so special about an empty goldfish jar that was already broken?

Moon.

At first it was not there. But now it suddenly appeared.

The goldfish jar shattered, the jar's bottom suddenly sank down, revealing a hole.

Gong Ping slowly turned her head toward Lu Xiaofeng. She looked at Lu Xiaofeng, who was swallowing his saliva, with her pair of big eyes, as big as ginkgo fruit, and asked, "What did you just say?"

"What I just said? I didn't say anything."

Lu Xiaofeng's eyes also grew big. "Just now, I seemed to be farting."

(Two)

Naturally the hole at the bottom of the goldfish jar was the entrance to a secret tunnel. It was either Gong Ping's luck was particularly good that she found the entrance in just one shot, or there was such an entrance at the bottom of every goldfish jar. Because although the hole was small, going down, the place was very spacious, just like a small living room built with stone masonry.

It's just that there is nothing in this living room, except a door. A copper door.

Pushing the copper door open, there was an equally-sized room, with another door. Except that other than the door, there were also some very

ancient torture instruments. There was even a 'burning frame', which was considered the most cruel torture instrument from the era of King Zhou[1].

Some of these instruments only existed in legends or hearsay, Lu Xiaofeng had never thought that he would be able to see them.

His vision was really not bad. But he really wanted to throw-up; although it was only instrument without anybody being tortured, he still felt like he was going to throw up.

Unexpectedly when he tried to push the door, it did not open. Fortunately there was a sign above the door. There were also eight characters written on the sign, 'If you are a gentleman, please knock.' [若是君子, 敬请敲门]. Thereupon, Lu Xiaofeng knocked the door.

In a way, sometimes Lu Xiaofeng could be very obedient. When told to drink wine, he would drink wine, when told to knock the door, he would knock the door; especially if the door belonged to a pretty young girl, not only he would knock even quicker, he would also knock it harder.

This time it was the same. As soon as the door was knocked, it opened. The one opening the door was, unexpectedly, really a beautiful girl. At least twenty years ago she must be a pretty young girl.

The one opening the door turned out to be the lady boss.

(Three)

Lu Xiaofeng's jaw dropped.

This time he was not scared by the lady boss, rather, he was scared silly by what was inside the stone room.

Whoever saw this kind of situation would stare blankly like an idiot.

The first thing Lu Xiaofeng saw was precisely that little b@stard.

He would never expect right now the little b@stard was acting like a big master, sprawling across a couch with his legs stretched out, his left hand held on to a head, his right hand also held on to another head.

Not even in his wildest dream would Lu Xiaofeng ever imagine that these two people would have their heads caught under this little beggar's control.

These two people were surprisingly the rich and powerful Sha Dahu and the one whose name shook the Jianghu in the past, the 'Three-hand Goddess' Xu Ba, Old Lady Xu.

And that was not the only strange thing.

Even stranger was that the coffin shop boss Zhao Xiazi, the grocery store boss Wang Dayan, and the exiled imperial concubine Gong Susu were all here as well. Just like Sha Dahu, they all sat below the little beggar as his prisoners.

Lu Xiaofeng knitted his four eyebrows; if he had eight eyebrows, he would knit all eight eyebrows as well.

"What's going on here?" He could not figure out.

This matter was actually very simple.

The little beggar was only laughing. He did not open his mouth. The lady boss was the one who spoke, "Liu Chengfeng was not only your friend, he was also our friend. There was too much injustice in his death; just like you, we want to find the murderer who killed him and avenge him."

By 'we', obviously she meant Gong Ping, the little beggar and she. Obviously, the rest of these people were, in their opinion, suspects in this murder case; at least one of these was the murderer.

"Sha Dahu, Zhao Xiazi, Old Lady Xu, Gong Susu, and this husband of mine who does not live up to expectations, all are possible suspects to be Liu Chengfeng's killer." The lady boss told Lu Xiaofeng, "Today you saw me in Sha Dahu's bed, it was because I always wanted to get clear information from him."

She sighed, "I am sure you understand that to trap a man like Sha Dahu, I must climb onto his bed first."

Actually, Lu Xiaofeng did not understand anything, until now. Now he started to understand bit by bit.

The little beggar finally opened his mouth, "By going to bed, ten thousand things will be blown clear, even Sha Dahu has fallen into the trap, much less those b@stards?" He pointed to Gong Susu and Xu Ba.

"Although the way I dealt with these two grannies is a bit different, to some extent we still use a bit of handsome-man scheme."

Lu Xiaofeng laughed.

Just as he started to laugh, he could not continue laughing anymore. Because he suddenly discovered two lethal weapons were striking two vital points on his body. One was the lady boss' hand, the other was Gong Ping's leg.

The lady boss' ten slim fingers, ten sharp fingertips, each fingernail was encased in some kind of thin copper finger cap, each one was as sharp as a sword.

Gong Ping's feet were wearing arrow boots [this is a literal translation, not sure what it is, but I think we can imagine]. One kick was able to crush stone into powder.

These two kinds of weapon were specific weapons used by women, just like some women's hearts, poisonous and fierce, and totally unpredictable.

If Lu Xiaofeng was not Lu Xiaofeng, most probably his death was already decided.

If Lu Xiaofeng was not Lu Xiaofeng, he did not have to wait until today to die. Up to date, he would have died three hundred seventy eight times.

That's why a lot of people believed Lu Xiaofeng could not die.

A long time later Lu Xiaofeng was still saying, "Honestly speaking, in all my life I have been going through a lot of dangers, many times I was this close to being finished. But the most dangerous situation was still that particular time." He said, "Because at that time I did not expect Gong Ping and the lady boss would kill me. Even more unexpected, their move was so vicious."

Lu Xiaofeng said, "If now you want me to rate the women in Jianghu whose martial art skill was the highest, the most terrifying, I would still consider them to be one of those women. Because right up to the present, there are indeed not many women in Jianghu who can surpass them."

He was telling the truth.

That time he escaped those two deadly attack, it was indeed a 'danger shaving his head'.

But the one more shocked than Lu Xiaofeng that time was the lady boss.

Her martial art skill was the result of hard training. Because of training martial art, the palm of her hands and the sole of her feet developed

calluses. Because she wanted to look pretty, so that men would like her even more, she spent a lot of time using lotion to remove these calluses.

Indeed she suffered not a few of hardship. Therefore, whenever she made a move, she had high confidence in herself. Although she knew that Lu Xiaofeng was a man that was very difficult to deal with, she was very confident of her own skill.

But she soon found herself to be wrong.

Because her strike was originally aimed at the small of Lu Xiaofeng's back, using the thin-as-blade finger caps on her five fingers, to scratch Lu Xiaofeng's xiaoyao [lit. laughter waist] acupoint. But the one she scratched was the waist of Gong Ping's pants.

It was not clear what technique Lu Xiaofeng has used, but suddenly he already slipped five, six chi [Chinese foot, about 1/3 of a meter] away.

The waist of Gong Ping's pants was ripped open, revealing a pair of legs.

A pair of slender, firm, and elastic legs. A pair once-a-man-sees-it-he-will-never-forget kind of legs.

Lu Xiaofeng had seen this pair of legs.

At the rear courtyard of Zhao Xiazi's coffin shop, beneath the flying violet long skirt. The legs he saw were precisely this pair of legs, he was absolutely sure about it.

He stared blankly.

Any man who suddenly saw this kind of legs, who saw the legs suddenly appeared behind ripped pants, he would certainly stare blankly as well. It's just that the reason Lu Xiaofeng was staring blankly this time was a bit different to the great majority of other men in the universe. This time he was dumbfounded, because ever since he knew Gong Ping, he had never expected that the old lady who wanted to kill him, whose legs exposed underneath the violet long skirt, could be Gong Ping.

Emotions sometimes can blind you, oftentimes it could cover the eyes, so that we cannot see what we ought to see.

The fortunate thing was that now he has seen it. The unfortunate thing was also now he has seen it.

Between the fortunate and unfortunate, oftentimes there was a blank space.

During this blank space, one could stare blankly.

The period when one was staring blankly, oftentimes it was other people's good opportunity.

Suddenly, all those people who were not supposed to move began to move. Sha Dahu, Zhao Xiazhi, Wang Dayan, Gong Susu, and Xu Ba were clearly being immobilized, but in that instant all started to move. Not only that, their movement was very fast, very accurate, very vicious.

This kind of fast, accurate, and vicious move, definitely was not something that people who grew up in this kind of desolate place were capable of achieving.

If a person was able to move this fast, this accurate, and this vicious, it does not matter which criteria is being used, this person would definitely be considered one of the best martial art experts in Jianghu.

‘Fifty’. It seems to be a large number. But if you counted how many people there were mingling in Jianghu, how many people were struggling to make their names in Jianghu, and how many actually managed to ‘make it’ in Jianghu?

In Jianghu, every day, every night, every moment, how many people were involved in decisive battle in order to seek survival, to preserve their lives? How many were actually defeated, how many met their death, and how many actually achieve victory?

If you could think about these things, then you will know that the matter of life and death, the matter of victory or defeat, are tied up to some extent with a delicate split second.

In such a delicate split second, Lu Xiaofeng fell.

If in such a split second, after receiving so much well-planned all-out attack by so many martial art experts, one person was still able to stand, then nobody in this world could fall.

To a person who had mingled in Jianghu for many years, who had been famous also for many years, making friends in countless number, and becoming enemies with also countless people, falling down could only mean one thing: death.

How could Lu Xiaofeng die?

(Four)

No one believed Lu Xiaofeng could die. Even if someone saw with his own eyes that someone else has chopped Lu Xiaofeng's neck, he still would not believe that the Lu Xiaofeng, who could not die, would actually give up his ghost and return to the western paradise.

Yet this time Lu Xiaofeng really gave up his ghost and returned to the western paradise.

What's going on here?

[1] King Zhou (紂王) - last king of the Shang Dynasty (or Yin Dynasty). Posthumous name given to Di Xin. Said to have invented this torture 炮烙 ('burning frame') to please his wife Daji (妲己). Mentioned in the Ming Dynasty's mythological novel, Investiture of the Gods (封神演義). For details: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Di_Xin. Image of 炮烙 can be found here: <http://www.zwbk.org/MyLemmaShow.aspx?lid=215398> (Courtesy of LuDongBin).

Part 2 Ximen Chuixue

Even though there is no sword in his hand, it won't give him any problem, because his body and his sword have dissolved into one entity; as long as the person exist, all things in the universe are his sword.

Chapter 11 – Sword legend in the evening rain on Mount Ba[1]

(One)

Spring night, spring rain, Mount Ba.

Night rains in the spring are always depressing, especially on Mount Ba, where desolate mountain range, sloping stony path, were covered with moss as dark as splashing ink. How many miserable memories of seniors and famous heroes were buried underneath the traces of the moss? How many spring flowers have become spring muds before they even bloomed?

There was a line of footprints on the spring mud, the footprints that were made after the last night's rain had stopped.

There was another rain tonight.

Behind the hazy, misty air of the night rain, at the end of the stony path, there was a Taoist temple. The joss stick had long gone, traces of human had also long gone, the awe-inspiring, thunderous sword aura of the

olden days, had never been seen again for who knows how long.

Since the Mount Ba's swordsman Taoist Gu of old, whose 'seven by seven, forty-nine hands turning-the-wind, dancing-the-willow sword' fame shook the earth, disappeared into the thin air - perhaps he had reached immortality - his disciples also scattered in all directions.

This Taoist temple, which was once revered by young people, who were infatuated with swordsmanship, as a sacred place, gradually became desolate. What's left was only an empty memory of some mythical legend and some moss-covered sword marks.

But over the past couple of years, at nights when the sky was clear and the moon was shining, the neighboring hunters often saw what seemed to be the faint light of an arc lantern inside the temple.

When there was a lantern, there must be people.

Question is: who were those people who came back to this place? And why?

(Two)

It was raining this late at night, the arc lantern was lit. A man sitting alone under the lamp; he did not look like a Mount Ba School's disciple, neither was he a Taoist priest.

The person who had lived for two years in this lonely, deserted Taoist temple on this mountain was unexpectedly a Buddhist monk.

A monk that could often pass several days without eating, a monk that could often pass several months without taking a bath. A monk that even could even pass several years without speaking.

But tonight, unexpectedly there were two people coming to this temple.

The two people seemed to have similar built, wearing two similar black coats, and two similar black felt hats. The hats had a very wide brim, and were worn very low, so that the hats were covering their faces.

Walking up the sloping stony path to this place, nobody knew how many fallen flowers they trampled that the flowers turned into spring mud. One of the two appeared to be already very tired, the other person had to stop frequently to wait for him.

When they were still several dozen zhang away, the monk sitting under the lantern already knew their arrival.

But the monk did not move.

Although the flame flickered incessantly, the monk did not move at all; he did not show the least bit of reaction. Even after the two people crossed the courtyard in front of the Taoist temple compound and reached the small cottage where he was, the monk did not show any reaction. This monk was not old, yet he has already entered the depth of meditation.

There was no response to the knock on the door; the two people braving the rain to climb the mountain could only push the door open by themselves.

Although the lantern was not too bright, it was enough to illuminate these two persons; it illuminated their mouth and forehead under the shadow of the brim of the hat.

Both persons had very pointy forehead, yet the lines were very soft. The outlines of their mouth were even more well-developed, gentle and beautiful.

Only women would have such mouths. And women who had this kind of mouth, no doubt were exceptionally attractive.

Two beautiful women, went up Mount Ba in the night rain, to visit a monk who meditated like an old monk.

Were they mad? Was there anything wrong with them?

If they were not mad, and there was nothing wrong with them, then there must be an unusually good reason, plus it must be for an unusually grave matter.

Two gorgeous women braved the rain across desolate mountain to visit a wretched monk, for what reason?

Two pretty women came looking for a monk, what could happen?

(Three)

The monk, who was not yet old, was still sitting in meditation.

The woman, who walked a bit faster, whose physical strength seemed better, whose stature was a bit taller, reached out with her snow white hand, using a movement that was almost more graceful than dancing, to take off the felt hat from her head. With a fluid movement, the raindrops dripped down off the hat, under the lantern light, the water drops looked like a strand of shining pearls. Her long hair that was originally kept inside the hat also flowed down like rain, covering half of her face, while at the same time exposing the other half.

Pitch-black, long and thin eyebrows, bright and beautiful eyes, a hint of smile at the corner of her mouth; spring has indeed returned to earth.

The monk's eyes were fixed on his nose, his nose was looking at his heart; practically, he did not seem to see the women in front of him.

But she seemed to be very familiar with the monk, furthermore, she spoke to him in a very intimate manner, "Monk, others say you are honest. If there are only ten thousand people on earth, there are at least nine thousand nine hundred and ninety nine people who say that you are honest."

The woman said, "But, as I see it, you monk, are not honest. Not the least bit."

The woman's stature was slender and graceful, plus she was charming, each movement was gentle, soft and beautiful. Only an exceptionally educated family of nobility would produce such a graceful bearing.

But when she talked to this mysterious and strange impoverished monk, she suddenly acted as if she was a little nun who was used to fooling around all day long in front of this monk.

Finally the monk could not help opening his mouth, "Which part of me is not honest?"

"You tell others that you were going to Mount Wutai to shut yourself up, yet you sneakily went to a Taoist monastery. I went up to heaven and down to Hades to look for you, and had spent more than a month before I finally find you." She said, "Tell me, aren't you the least bit honest?"

The monk sighed, "Why are you looking for the monk?" With a pained expression on his face he said, "Monk does not even eat meat soup [routang]."

This girl was unexpectedly the Miss Niu [lit. cow], who for the past few years was famous in Jianghu for her mischief and creating trouble, the Niu Routang [Beef Soup].

Recently, people also gave her another nickname, 'Cowhide Candy' [niu pi tang (different character)] behind her back.

"Actually, you ought to know that when I am looking for you, there can't be any good thing."

"Amitufo, Monk only wishes that you are looking for me this time, it is not for a bad thing."

"Not only not bad, it is actually very good."

"Oh?"

"I am looking for you this time, it is to help you upholding yiqi toward your true friend, which is what you guys are saying: cultivate great achievements and virtue." Miss Niu said, "If you do this kind of things a couple times more often, you will become a luohan [arhat] earlier."

"What luohan? Chicken-finder luohan?"

Miss Niu winked and giggled, "What's wrong with chicken-finder luohan? Big or small they are still luohan, no need to be vanquishing-dragons-and-tigers luohan."

With a bitter laugh the monk said, "Big Miss Niu, can you spare me this time? Do you think Monk really does not know why you came to see me?"

"Do you?"

"Even if I am thinking with my buttocks I can still figure out that it must be because of your Lu Xiaofeng has disappeared, hence you want Monk to go looking for him." The monk said, "Too bad Monk can no longer do

this kind of foolish thing of yours."

Miss Niu's expression suddenly turned very serious, plus she seemed to have an unspeakable difficulty. "You did not guess wrong, Lu Xiaofeng indeed has disappeared, but the circumstances around this matter is different than in the past."

"What's the difference?"

"This time, he had no quarrel with me, and it is not for the sake of other women either." Miss Niu said, "Before he left this time, he still met with me once, saying that because a good friend suddenly went missing, he wanted to travel to borderland to look for him; also, there is good possibility that he will be in danger."

She looked as if she was about to cry, "At first I was determined to come with him, who would have thought that he sneakily left alone. Once he was gone, there is no more news about him. Tell me, won't that worry me to death?"

"No worry, no worry at all," the monk very slowly said, "Monk has done some fortune telling for him, he won't die."

"No matter what, you must go to look for him."

"Why?"

"Because you are his good friend." Miss Niu said, "Who in Jianghu did not know that Honest Monk is Lu Xiaoji's [little chicken] good friend? He

is in danger, if you don't go looking for him, won't people laugh at you to their death?"

Unexpectedly, this monk was the number one wandering hero of the Buddhism, the world famous Honest Monk.

It was said that he had never said a single lie in his life, but if there is anyone who wanted to force him to tell the truth, very soon that person might not be able to speak anymore.

It was said that one time he was crossing the Yellow River on boat, and happened to come across a robbery. He said that his pocket was as empty as if it was just being washed, the robbers believed him. After the robbers left, he ran after them and confessed that he had been lying, and handed over the little money he had to them. The next morning, those pirates suddenly died in their den without any rhyme or reasons.

The stories around this monk are indeed not a few, plus they are very interesting. Too bad our story this time is not about him.

When Big Miss Niu said she wanted to move someone, she really could resurrect a dead man. But Honest Monk did not seem to hear even one word of what she said.

"Whatever you say is useless, besides, this time Monk has already eaten steel chain, I bind my heart that when I say I won't go, then I won't go."

"Are you telling the truth?"

"It's the truth."

"Not a lie?"

"Not a lie."

Miss Niu sighed. "In that case, I have no choice but to tell you a story."

And her story went like this: "There was once a monk, people say that he is annoyingly honest, and has never touched meat and fish, let alone getting close to female charms. When he came across women, he did not even dare to cast a single glance, because if he looked, he would at least look seven, eight hundred times."

"Once upon a time, he unexpectedly talked to a woman about feeling, discussing love. The girl was called Xiao Douzi [lit. little red bean]."

"This little girl's lot in life was really pitiful, she grew up in a pleasure house. Her body was weak, and she had some illness, therefore, this very-honest Monk of ours took great pity on her, he felt sorry for her."

"Pitying her was not a big deal, the big deal was that from pity love grew, and once love sprouted, there was no end in sight."

"His only regret was that he was a monk, and a poor one at that, he couldn't possibly fool around with several thousand taels of silver to redeem a pleasure house woman, let alone blatantly snatch her away from the brothel."

"Therefore, this passionate monk had no choice but to quietly keep his regret inside and leave, to hide in a place where he thought nobody else would be able to find him, to yearn in sorrow, to repent from his feeling."

Speaking to this point, Beef Soup paused for a moment; staring at Honest Monk, she asked, "What do you say, isn't this story interesting?"

Listening to this point, Honest Monk's already panic expression turned even paler that not the least bit trace of blood remained. After a long, long time he finally replied, "Not interesting."

"I didn't think it was interesting either." Miss Niu said, "Such a sad story, I don't like to hear it either."

She sighed. "But this is a true story, the people are real, the story is real."

"Oh?"

Miss Niu stared at the monk for another half a day. Suddenly she asked, "Do you know who the monk is in this story?"

"I ... I do."

"Well, tell me."

Sweats started to appear on Honest Monk's forehead, but he still

struggled to answer, "The monk in this story was me."

Miss Niu smiled; she sighed, "No matter what, Honest Monk really deserves to be called Honest Monk, he indeed never tells a lie."

Suddenly she pulled the other woman dressed in black cape to Honest Monk's presence, and took her felt hat off of her, revealing a delicate and pretty, thin and weak, lovely and touching face; the cheeks were already wet with tears.

"Look here, who is she?"

Honest Monk stared blankly.

Naturally he knew who she was; until the heaven becomes desolate and the earth turns old, until the moon wanes and the stars fall, it's impossible for him not to know her.

Xiao Douzi, how can it be you?

Xiao Douzi's tears were as big as beans.

Looking at their expressions, Miss Niu wanted to laugh, but she simply could not laugh.

So much so that she was thinking of leaving, leaving far away, so that they could be alone, sharing their thoughts with each other.

Who would have thought that Honest Monk called out to her instead, "I also have something I want to show you."

"What is it?"

Honest Monk did not reply, he merely slowly lifted up his old, worn, and several-sizes-too-big monk robe, revealing a pair of legs.

Beef Soup was dumbfounded.

The legs she saw already did not look like legs, but a pair of snapped off dried up branch. Not only they looked thin and weak, practically the legs had already shriveled and degenerated.

Even more surprising, the ankles of these legs were locked with an extremely thick iron chains.

"The lock is 'exquisite crystal' made by Qi Qiao Tang [lit. hall of seven skillful], I have thrown the key to the valley below. No one else on this earth is able to open it." The monk said, "At the foot of the mountain there is a woodcutter who deliver a bowl of rice and vegetable, and a bottle of water, every day."

Miss Niu could not resist asking, "Why did you do this?"

But she also knew that not only this question should not be asked, asking it would be unnecessary.

A lone man under a lantern in evening rain on Mount Ba [see note on title], yet his heart was by a pitiful woman under red lanterns and green wine [idiom, meaning 'feasting and pleasure seeking' or 'debauched and corrupt environment']; how could he control himself? How could he stop himself from seeing her?

A man who has never experience passion, once his passion is aroused, it will get out of hand very fast, a sudden outbreak of emotion like flash flood from the mountain; who can control it?

After all, Honest Monk was still a human being, furthermore, he was a Jianghu man; if it is difficult for even 'taishang' [title of respects for Taoists] to escape being moved by sentiments, much less Jianghu people?

Therefore, he could only use this kind of method to lock himself up, so he could avoid making mistake.

Big Miss Niu's eyes were moist. In such circumstance, what else could she say? She could only leave.

Who would have thought that Honest Monk called out again? Naturally now he could not accompany her looking for Lu Xiaofeng, even if he left, he could not save Lu Xiaofeng. He could only tell Beef Soup, "Although Lu Xiaofeng loves to fool around with happy face, sometimes even talks a bunch of nonsense, but sometimes he could also speak one or two sincere words."

Honest Monk said, "There was one time when he was drunk he said something that until today I cannot forget."

"What did he say?"

"He said, only in front of one person he did not dare to talk rubbish."

"Why?"

"Because in this world, only this one person is capable of killing him."
The Monk said, "If he ever face a real danger, only this one person is capable of saving him."

"Who is this person?"

"Ximen Chuixue."

(Four)

Ximen Chuixue, with clothes as white as snow, with heart also as cold as snow. [Reminder: 'chui xue' means 'blowing snow'.]

It seemed that in all his life, he has never loved anybody. Even if he did, it has already become a sad past, something that he could not bear to remember.

He did not have any relative, he had no friend either, so much so that he did not even have any enemy. Other than 'sword', in this world he had nothing at all.

This kind of man, what could possibly move him?

"I know that one time, just so that he could test Lu Xiaofeng's fingers, whether those two fingers could clamp his sword, he was ready to decide life and death with Lu Xiaofeng in split second." Miss Niu said, "He did not even hesitate to have Lu Xiaofeng die under his sword."

"I also heard about it," Honest Monk said, "It happened after the Mansion of Spirits affair, by the Xie Jian Chi [lit. shedding-the-sword pond] on Mount Wudang."

"But he did not make his move at all."

"Because at that time he considered Lu Xiaofeng's heart has already died, that he was no different than a dead man."

Miss Niu sadly said, "Perhaps Lu Xiaofeng is really dead by now."

"But as long as he is not dead, the only person who can save him is Ximen Chuixue." Honest Monk said, "Monk has never told lies, not only Ximen Chuixue' swordsmanship is number one, his cool-headedness and intelligence also no one can surpass."

"Monk is honest, I believe the Monk." Miss Niu said, "But I don't know how can I convince him to rescue Lu Xiaofeng?"

"I don't know either."

“How can you not know?” Miss Niu asked Honest Monk.

“Because practically there is no way.” The Monk said, “Even if you can talk someone to return to life, with him, you simply won’t have any chance.”

He was wearing an expression that although very honest, there was also a surreptitious look on his eyes, as he fixed his gaze on Beef Soup and said word-by-word, “I only have something I want to tell you; you must remember it in your heart.”

Naturally Honest Monk would say honest words, and honest words usually are very useful. Miss Niu naturally wanted to listen to each word carefully.

Who would have thought that Honest Monk only said eight words, and each word could annoy people to their death.

“When there is no way, that means there must be a way.” [没法子, 就是有法子 – mei fa zi, jiu shi you fa zi]

Monks like keen words; monks who can speak keen words are reasonable monks.

But in Miss Niu’s ears, it sounded like someone had just released a series of eight farts in succession.

[1] Evening rain on Mt. Ba [巴山夜雨] is also an idiom: lonely in strange land. Additional info (courtesy of LuDongBin): Co-incidentally there is this

China movie in 1980 by the same name. The theme centers around the time of the Cultural Revolution and talks about the Gang of Four.

But no, this verse has a more illustrious heritage. This is from a famous poem composed by Li Shangyin 李商隱 (812-858); a Late Tang poet par excellence who shared the limelight with Du Fu. Among the collection of the 300 Tang Poems, there are 22 of his works, including this one here. Poems mostly about romance, although there were some political ones too. Because of his penchant for intense imagery, his poems are very difficult to translate. It was said that Roger Waters of Pink Floyd fame borrowed from Li's poems to create some of his songs.

Here is the poem:

{夜雨寄北}

君问归期未有期,

巴山夜雨涨秋池.

何当共剪西窗烛,

却话巴山夜雨时。

When will I return? This I cannot say,

Perhaps when the night rains

Overflow the Daba's autumn pools once again;

And we reminisce by the western window;

The night rains fall on Daba.

1. 巴山: Refers to the Daba Mountains in the vicinity of China mountainous region in southwest China.

2. 剪西窗烛: Trimming the candle by the western window - a phrase to indicate thinking of or chatting with your loved ones. A literal translation would have lost the original meaning. See:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_Shangyin

Chapter 12 – Super-assassins appear on cloud penetrating peak

This moment Ximen Chuixue was sitting on a blue-green rock on a plateau on the mountain top, he was looking away at the distant scenery.

Dusk, late dusk.

Like wisps of smoke the clouds on the distant drifted into the vast, dark blue expanse of the sky, nothing else could be seen, nothing was visible.

To someone whose life has just started, or perhaps someone whose life has been completely satisfied, it was no more than a piece of nothingness, a piece of primal chaos; at most it was no more than a roll of painting, so that someone who was already a cheerful person could find a bit of enjoyment in tranquility.

But to someone like Ximen Chuixue, this nothingness was the life itself. Only in the nothingness of primal chaos he would be able to see a lot of things that in any other places he would not be able to see, only here and now he would be able to see himself.

This was most important. For more than ten years Ximen Chuixue had virtually no opportunity to see himself.

Because his heart and eyes have long ago already blinded by a layer of blood [xue], and of course, by a layer of snow [xue].

Ice is colder than iced water, snow is even colder than iced water.

What kind of person was Ximen Chuixue? In the present age, several hundred thousand people knew the name Ximen Chuixue, but only a few knew his origin, his thoughts, his feelings, and his past.

Even he himself did not know.

Of course it was not that he did not know, rather, he had already forgotten.

But how could he forget?

Is there anything in life that is more difficult than 'forgetting'?

He would have to pay heavy price to forget these things.

Ximen Chuixue suddenly remembered Lu Xiaofeng. At this moment, he actually did not want to remember Lu Xiaofeng.

It is unfortunate that humanity's greatest irony is that people tend to remember other people they should not remember, or things that they should forget.

Ximen Chuixue and Lu Xiaofeng have known each other for nearly twenty years.

Twenty years, what a long time. Some people died as soon as they were born, some people's days are cut short only after a few days or a few

months after they were born. To these people, twenty years are practically something that they could not even look forward to.

To a woman who had just been married, if her husband died in the first two or three years during which they shared their conjugal love the most, then twenty years would be a blessing that she could not even beg for.

To an old person who is nearing the end of his life, although he understood that he would not live for another twenty years, but the last twenty years of his life would ever be unforgettable.

Because in every person's life, there will always be the most important twenty-year period. Every day in this twenty-year period something can happen that could change the fate of his life.

That's why Ximen Chuixue could think of Lu Xiaofeng.

He and Lu Xiaofeng have known each other for twenty years, yet the things he understood about Lu Xiaofeng were actually very few. He had never learned in what kind of family Lu Xiaofeng was born, he had never known in what kind of environment Lu Xiaofeng was brought up.

Perhaps it was because he never wanted to know.

There are actually friends in the world that are just like that, although they often spend time together, they never thought about finding out each other's past events, certainly they never thought about prying into the friend's private business.

Friends of Jianghu cross into each other path via yiqi and blood; as long as you deal with me in a real-manly manner today, even if you are a b@stard, I don't give it a damn.

In this world, real men are not too many anymore.

If anybody ever said that Lu Xiaofeng was not a real man, this person ought to run and hide quickly in some abandoned temple on a desolate mountain to ask for the Heaven's protection; the Heaven's protection so that no friend of Lu Xiaofeng would ever find him. Even more, he should ask the Heaven's protection that Ximen Chuixue would never find him.

For the sake of someone that he practically did not know, so much so that someone that he has not even met, Ximen Chuixue would rush by the stars and the moon, traveling several thousand li, took a deep bath in incense, fasting for three, five days, and for the sake of this total stranger, kill the undefeated killer.

Simply because he was willing to do this thing.

Simply because he was delighted to do so.

Whether he would succeed or fail, whether he would win or lose, whether he would live or die, he simply did not care.

But what if he was not delighted? What if he was unwilling?

Then there was no way he would do such thing. No way at all. Even if you had all his friends coming to him, lining up in front of his door,

kneeling, he would act as if he had never seen the shadow of any of those so-called friends.

Even if it was for Lu Xiaofeng's sake.

If he was not happy and was unwilling, even if someone killed Lu Xiaofeng right in front of his face, he would not see it.

The only thing that Ximen Chuixue could see was his sword.

(Two)

The setting sun suddenly emerged from behind a layer of dark, elongated and graceful cloud, the sun appeared red; very, very red.

The sun is most red when it is about to sink.

What about people? Aren't people the same?

Ximen Chuixue never wanted to think about it, there are always inevitable sorrows in one's life, why must he think about it? Even if he did, and then what?

He only knew that this moment there must be someone wielding a sword that he has never seen, using a sword technique that he has never seen, would come to decide life and death in split second with him.

It was not his premonition.

With a sword in his hand he had criss-crossed the Jianghu unhindered for twenty years, he had gone through fire and water countless times, yet now he was still alive. Naturally he also possessed some kind of animal-like instinct, just like some other reclusive, arrogant Jianghu swordsmen, famous heroes, and killers.

But this time, he travelled thousands of li, fasted and took a bath, and came to the summit of this mountain, just because he had an appointment.

The appointment was right here, right this moment.

He did not know the person making the appointment with him. But the person who dared to make appointment with him was undoubtedly a very powerful person, and was extremely confident. He must be very confident of his own strength, and his sword.

This is the point that anybody could have thought.

Who was this person? Why did he make an appointment with Ximen Chuixue, who never leave any 'living mouth' from under his sword, and has never been defeated?

(Three)

When the red sun first appeared, it was red like the rouge on a shy young woman's face on her wedding day. But now it was as red as the

blood on the enemy's sword.

A lone man was walking slowly toward the summit of the mountain.

If he was using qinggong to fly up the mountain, or perhaps using 'Green Rope Skill' to climb up, that person could not be considered a worthy adversary.

But the man was walking slowly, the kind of speed a husband, who was under his wife's thumb, would use to walk toward his wife's chamber when he returned home very late at night; light and slow, gently and cautiously, afraid that he might make the slightest noise, wishing earnestly that he could take his shoes off.

But the man walking up right now was wearing a pair of very, very heavy boots. We can even say that there is absolutely nobody in the world wearing any shoes heavier than his boots.

This man was unexpectedly wearing a pair of iron boots. A pair of boots made of pure iron.

If you have a very experienced old blacksmith here and you ask him for his most conservative estimates, he would say that each one of these boots would weigh at least the same as the thigh of the fattest man in the world.

This kind of weight is very difficult to estimate, but at least it would be between nine and a half to thirteen, fourteen catties [1 catty is approx. 1/2kg or 1lb.]

Counting from the middle, a leg would be ten catties, two legs twenty catties; wearing a pair of twenty-catty iron boots, most people would make noise like thunder when walking, much less when climbing a mountain, going over mountain ridges and dangerous slopes, not to mention this man was a super-fat man.

Yet as this super-fat man wearing heavy iron boots moved from a flat ground to this high mountain with steep ridges, his footsteps were even lighter than a husband coming home late, as light as a little girl sneaking into the kitchen to steal some midnight snack.

This man happened to be big and tall, burly, and fat, yet he was just as light as a butterfly.

This corpulent man had delicate features and smiling face, he looked a bit like Buddha Maitreya, but those who knew him would rather see a hundred captured evil spirits than to come across him.

Ximen Chuixue practically did not turn his head at all. In this world, perhaps there was no one worthy to have Ximen Chuixue look at him.

Surprisingly, this man did not bother Ximen Chuixue either; even more so, he did not kick Ximen Chuixue with his pair of big iron boots. He simply unloaded the sack he had been carrying on his back and took out a big piece of beef stewed in soy sauce and spices, two roasted geese, seventeen, eighteen strips of barbequed pork [char siu] made by master chef of Lingnan [old term for south China, esp. Guangdong and Guangxi], one whole small but fat pig, thirty, forty steamed buns, and seventy or eighty pieces of lard crystal sugar thousand-layer cakes; he spread a

large piece of cloth and arranged all these food on it. And then he just sat down.

He really just sat there, moving neither his hands nor his mouth. Such a big, fat person, facing such a big pile of delicious food, yet unexpectedly he just sat down, unmoving, only looking, not eating.

Ximen Chuixue did not move either, he did not look, but suddenly he said something very strange, "Xiao Shouzi [lit. little thin person], I know it was not you, so you won't die today."

He added, "But you really shouldn't be here today."

In an instant the man wearing iron boots' fat-face suddenly swelled up like bubbling mud, plus his body shook incessantly, shaking like a pig inside a deep fryer full of boiling oil.

He was not a 'little thin person', he was a 'big fat person'; if Ximen Chuixue was warning a thin person, why would a big fat person be afraid?

The fat person was afraid to be thin, because when he was a child he was thin, therefore, he wore big iron boots; therefore, he did his utmost to eat food that would make him fat. And since he ate like that, how could he not be fat?

In order to increase his weight, ever since he was very little he had started wearing iron shoes. Walking like that, if his qinggong was not good, would it make any sense?

But now he could not be fatter than he was. So although he always carried some food that he loved the most, he could only watch, but could not eat.

For the past two, three years, this 'little thin person' has risen in Jianghu to be a super-assassin, 'The Big Bass Drum'.

His belly was as big as a drum, his breathing was as loud as a drum, so much so that his whole body looked like a drum.

Such an obese, commonplace, and uncouth person, who would guard against him? Hence the reason for the last nineteen months the number of great heroes of Wulin who died under his fat but small hands had far surpassed the number of people who died under Ximen Chuixue's sword.

But Ximen Chuixue knew that this man came here today not because he had an appointment.

Even if this 'little thin person' who was big and fat ate the Demon Cult's 'confusing-soul medication', he would not have dared to come and provoke Ximen Chuixue.

Who would dare to provoke Ximen Chuixue?

By this time, from under the steep mountain ridge came the sound of footsteps, a heavy sound of footsteps, as if an 800-catty big fat person was wearing a pair of eighty-catty iron boots.

But before this person arrived, Ximen Chuixue already knew that not

only this person was neither fat nor heavy, the shoes worn were a pair of light, thin, and soft embroidered shoes.

Listening to the person's footsteps, the tense expression of the man wearing iron boots immediately relaxed. Ximen Chuixue's expression, however, suddenly became as red as blood, as cold as snow. [note: play on words, blood and snow are both 'xue' (different characters)]

Author's Note:

Writing wuxia novel for twenty-three, four, five, six, seven years, I have never written a 'Note'.

But since I was little I always love reading the 'Note'. Because it is often very good, but also very short. Oftentimes it can make people laugh heartily.

For example, after someone wrote, 'so and so pulled the sword', he also wrote a note, 'this person actually already pulled the sword and put it on the table, after he finished eating, he wore it again on his waist, hence he was able to immediately pull it out.'

After you read such note, if you don't laugh aloud, what do you do?
Cry?

Sometimes 'Note' can also express the author's opinion and scholarly knowledge, 'Note' explains things that others did not know but wish to hear, sometimes it is even like 'painting a dragon and dot the eyes' [i.e. to add the vital finishing touch], that without this 'dot', the 'dragon' won't

look alive.

Gifted scholars' annotation is often like that. The four gifted scholars of the Jin sages[1].

The note I am writing now has nothing to do with Lu Xiaofeng, let alone Ximen Chuixue, so much so that it doesn't even have anything to do with this story. But if I do not write, my heart will be unhappy, and then the readers' hearts will also be unhappy.

Because two persons appeared in this 'birds do not lay eggs' 'Note', whose reputation, in modern day fiction lovers' eye, is probably a lot higher than Lu Xiaofeng and Ximen Chuixue.

These two persons, of course, are my friends; these two persons, of course, are Jin Yong and Ni Kuang.

One day, late at night, Ni Kuang and I had some drink together. I don't know how many hundred or how many thousand times we drank together, also I don't know how many 'birds do not lay eggs' matters we talked that we did not know whether to laugh or to cry.

The difference was, that day I proposed a couplet that 'even hens do not lay eggs' to him. I spoke the upper line, and asked Ni Kuang to come up with the lower part to complete it.

The upper part was 'ice is colder than iced water' [冰比冰水冰, lit. 'ice is more ice than water'; my apology, I am not a scholar].

Ice is certainly colder than iced water. When ice is dissolved in the water, the temperature is already rising.

When water reaches its freezing point, it will solidify to become ice. Therefore, it does not matter what kind of water in the world, it can't be colder than ice.

This upper part was exceptionally scholarly, three out of six characters (sic) are 'bing' [ice]. The first 'bing' was a noun, the second 'bing' was an adjective, and so was the third.

I have done some research with a lot of scholarly friends, there is no other written language in the world that can produce similar/analogous sentence with so few words.

Couplet is a unique form in Chinese script, it is not extremely difficult, but it is extremely fascinating.

The boring part is, although the upper part is there, nobody knew where the lower part may be.

I could not come up with anything, neither did Ni Kuang.

Ni Kuang is a lot smarter than I am, and he is also much more fun than I am; even the most discerning woman, when she saw him, her remark was, "This man is so much fun."

But even the most fun person sometimes will have some not-fun time. Such an interesting upper line, he could not come up with the lower line.

This bit-by-bit is not surprising.

The surprising thing is, when Jin Yong heard this upper part, it was just like when he usually thought about a lot of other problems; he thought about it for a long time, and then he only said four words, "This couplet doesn't make any sense." [此联不通 – ci lian bu tong]

Hearing these four words, I was extremely happy, because I know, 'This couplet doesn't make any sense,' means 'I cannot complete it either.'

Mr. Jin Yong is considered wise and farsighted. Mr. Ni Kuang is sharp, quick and talented. Under this circumstances, if there is anybody who can complete the couplet 'ice is colder than iced water', and the lower part suitably matches, Jin Yong, Ni Kuang and I are willing to send a copy of our autographed book, as a tribute to this gentleman.

I am afraid this 'Note' is one of the longest in all martial art novels.

Editor's note:

The above 'Note' seems a little nondescript. After a lot of online research, there are a lot of 'Laughter of The Sword God', and every single one has this 'Note'. Yet it cannot be confirmed whether it was Gu Long's own writing or not. In the preface of the collection of his works, which resembles triple-couplet, Great Master Jin Yong denied it. From this, it is evident that to say the least, the spreading of this upper part of the couplet 'ice is colder than iced water' has nothing to do with Jin Yong.

[1] Courtesy of LuDongBin: I think this refers to Jin Shengtan's (金圣叹) (1610?—7 August 1661) scholarly work entitled "Six Works of Genius" (六才子書) wherein he listed and made extensive commentaries on the then prevailing 6 works that he considered had high literary merits. These 6 are: Zhuangzi, Li Sao, Shiji, Du Fu's poems, The Story of the Western Wing (Xi Xiang Ji) and Water Margin (Shuihu Zhuan) in that order. Note that Du Fu is ranked no. 4 relating to poems.

Hence I suspect Gu Long's (or whoever he might be) 四才子 is referring to Shengtan's commentaries and notation about no 4, Du Fu in conjunction with the couplet “冰比冰水冰”.

Either that or he got it wrong and it should be 六才子.

See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jin_Shengtan

Chapter 13 – Big Bass Drum and Embroidered Shoes

(One)

The woman who was going up the mountain was lanky, with long face, and eyes and eyebrows slanted upward. In her tough and heroic spirit aura, there was a bit of seductiveness. Although not beautiful, she was quite attractive. She was wearing a very short silver fox cape, exposing her slender legs, and sure enough, on her feet was a pair of embroidered shoes.

Such a slender woman, how come her footsteps were a lot louder than the Big Bass Drum?

There was only one answer to this question.

She did that on purpose; she intentionally flaunted her skill, purposefully showing off her martial art prowess.

The skill she trained was very special, plus it has been extinct from Jianghu for a long time, an external-type of martial art. When needed, the skill would enable the practitioner to make his body heavier than several-hundred-catty big steelyard.

No women have ever trained this kind of martial art, hence no women have ever trained it to perfection.

She has always been very proud of this.

Hence she was known as 'Embroidered Shoes'.

Naturally it was not her real name, yet people who knew her have never known her with any other names.

As Embroidered Shoes went up the mountain, just like Big Bass Drum, she also brought some very peculiar things.

Naturally the things she brought were not food.

What she brought were a top-quality lacquered make-up chest, an ivory box of gambling instruments, including a set of marbles, a set of paijiu [pai gow], and a set of cards.

The most peculiar thing was that behind her followed a very pretty little boy, carrying a set of beautiful bedding and quilt.

Such woman was indeed very strange.

(Two)

Ximen Chuixue was still looking at the boundless horizon, he still did not turn his head. Big Bass Drum's face turned green, his eyes looked like a pair of belly buttons.

They all knew this woman's background to the finest details. She was also one of the few super-assassins who in the recent years had risen in

Jianghu. Only she had something else, a very particular skill, that not only the Big Bass Drum could not compare with, no one else could either.

It was said that the money she earned was more than the other three, four super-assassins, who enjoyed the same reputation as she did, combined.

What was the reason?

Seeing Big Bass Drum, Embroidered Shoes laughed; when she laughed, she looked even more charming.

"Dagu Xiong [Brother Big Bass Drum], others are saying that you are big-hearted and serene; you are indeed a relaxed and magnanimous person. Lately you are putting more and more weight."

But Big Bass Drum sighed. "What's the use of putting more weight? How much will I get for a catty of my fat?" He said, "To get rich, now that's the real skill."

"That is the truth."

"I hear you are getting richer and richer," Big Bass Drum said, "I hear that even several big-name families in Shanxi sometimes need to turn some money to you."

"That is also true." Embroidered Shoes sighed again, "Although having a lot of money is troublesome, who told me to be born to make money?"

Suddenly her expression turned very serious as she asked Big Bass Drum, "Have you ever heard that the money I make is more than all of you put together?"

"I have."

"Yet you also ought to know that my price for killing people is not at all higher than yours."

"I know."

"Then how did I make more money than you do?"

She answered her own question, "Because not only I can make money, I can also earn money." Embroidered Shoes said, "I am not like you, who are willing to do only the second oldest business in the world; even some kind of oldest profession in the world I also do."

Big Bass Drum deliberately asked, "I know that the second oldest profession in the world is murder, but what is the oldest profession in the world?"

"Prostitution, naturally." Embroidered Shoes' countenance did not even change, "The oldest profession in history is prostitution."

Big Bass Drum could only smile wryly, his smile did not look like he was about to cry, but it looked like he was about to vomit.

Yet Embroidered Shoes did not show the least bit of emotion.

"Whatever people want, I sell it to them. They want me to kill, I'll kill, for seventeen thousand five hundred taels; as long as I have the money on hand, I guarantee a life will be gone, never fail." Embroidered Shoes said, "They want to gamble, I'll gamble. I always bring a set of cards with me. Whoever comes, I'll serve him, as long as he has money to lose. Even if you get your money from digging your ancestors' grave, I will win it anyway."

"Good," Big Bass Drum deliberately clapped his hands, "You have character."

"People want me to sing, I'll sing a song for them, five thousand taels per song. There is money, there is song."

"Five thousand per song, isn't that a bit too much?"

"Not much." Embroidered Shoes said, "Not only it's not much, my profit is a bit less."

"Who would want to pay you five thousand taels to hear you sing?"

"There are many people like that."

"Are they a bit insane?"

"Not at all."

"Do you sing better than the others?"

"Not the least bit." Embroidered Shoes said, "It's just that I am very different from other people who sing."

She asked the Big Bass Drum, "Just think, if those newly rich people, whose belly is full of fat and oil, are able to invite one of the world's most famous killers in their festivity and sing a song for them, won't it give them a lot of face?"

Big Bass Drum sighed, "That is very true."

"If they give you five thousand taels, would you sing for them?"

"I won't."

"Then, do you think five thousand taels are too much?"

"Not too much."

"Therefore, I make more money than all of you. It is the heaven's will and the earth's intention." Embroidered Shoes said, "Besides, I am also willing to accompany people to bed."

"I can see that." The Big Bass Drum let out a wry laugh, "You even bring

your own bedding."

"That's right. Bringing my own bedding is not only cleaner, it is more convenient as well." Embroidered Shoes said, "You want to sleep with me? You can. Seventeen thousand five hundred taels. With money at hand, I will take my pants off."

Big Bass Drum was shocked, "Sleeping with you is the same price as killing people?"

"Of course it is."

Big Bass Drum looked at her, up and down, down and up; he shook his head theatrically, "Now that, I cannot see."

Embroidered Shoes was not angry, "I understand what you mean, although I cannot be considered ugly, my beauty is not worth seventeen thousand five hundred taels." She said, "It's just that ..."

"It's just that you are the renowned Embroidered Shoes." Big Bass Drum finished off for her, "Famous women, even if they are a bit ugly, and a bit old, there are still a lot of old suckers with more money than sense who would be willing to be duped."

"You got that right." Embroidered Shoes said, "We can be considered people of the same trade, if you want to call on me, I can give you a ten percent discount."

(Three)

The sky gradually turned dark, the night has arrived. Ximen Chuixue was still sitting alone, motionless. Embroidered Shoes lowered her voice to ask the Big Bass Drum, "Who's that?"

"You don't know who he is?"

"I did not pay any attention." Embroidered Shoes said, "Just now I only paid my attention to you."

"What about now?"

"A man, who is neither a stone statue nor a wooden man, sitting without moving over there for a long time, even if I wanted not to pay any attention, I just can't." Embroidered Shoes said, "Besides, every time I cast a glance or two that way, I always felt a bit cold."

"You clearly have noticed who he is; let me ask you a question then."

"Go ahead."

"You came here, was it because someone hired you to kill?"

"You're probably right!" Embroidered Shoes said, "That person paid me seventeen thousand five hundred taels, most probably it was not to accompany him to bed."

"Do you know who is the person he wanted to be killed?"

"I don't."

"In that case, you'd better pray to God quickly."

"Pray to God for what?"

"Pray that God will bless and protect you, that your client is not insane, that the person he wanted you to kill is not him."

Embroidered Shoes followed Big Bass Drum's gaze. That man was still sitting alone on the rock.

"Why not him?" Embroidered Shoes asked, "Who is he?"

"Ximen Chuixue."

Embroidered Shoes was dumbfounded; she was aghast.

Ximen Chuixue?

She never thought that just a person's name would make her that terrified. In all her life, she did not seem to be afraid of anybody. Yet right now she suddenly felt terribly cold.

(Four)

In the boundless night, the white clothes Ximen Chuixue was wearing looked even more like snow.

Just then, two palace-style lanterns suddenly appeared in the dark. A man with his hands behind his back was walking behind the lanterns, his entire clothes was unexpectedly also as white as snow.

The two palace lanterns were carried by two beautiful women dressed in palace attire, their long hair loose like clouds, they had slender waists, long legs, their manners elegant; although they can't be considered choice-palace-beauties, they must have been trained by 'professional lady'.

Not only they had beautiful appearance, their skill was not bad either; otherwise, how could they walked up the mountain peak in the night?

Other than this kind of skill, their other skills must be not bad either. Therefore, their worth must be exceptionally high.

The man in white who followed behind them was a white-faced young man; his clothes were as white as snow, his face was as white as his clothes.

Around his waist was a jade belt, on the belt was a sword; both the sword and the jade belt were equally priceless.

Embroidered Shoes asked Big Bass Drum, "What do you think of that person?"

"That person is very handsome, very good-looking, not only he has style, he is also lordly."

"And he has money."

"Correct."

"And so he is your client?"

"That is also correct."

With a wry smile Big Bass Drum said, "Coincidentally, my client is also him; therefore, I have already prayed to God long ago."

The young man smiled. "Fortunately, I am not asking you to kill Ximen Chuixue!" He said, "Only lunatics would want you to kill Ximen Chuixue!"

Embroidered Shoes seemed a bit unconvinced.

"You think Ximen Chuixue will really not pay us any attention?" she asked the young man.

"That's not what I meant," the young man said nonchalantly, "I was just saying that if right now I insist on you two killing Ximen Chuixue, I am sure that you'd kill me first."

He added with a faint smile on his face, "Killing me is definitely a lot

easier than killing him."

"That's right." The silent Ximen Chuixue suddenly opened his mouth, "Killing you is easy, killing me is difficult!"

His voice was ice-cold, "It's a pity that they can't kill you either!"

"Why?"

"Because as soon as they make their move, they will die under my sword."

"Your sword? Where is it?"

"I have it."

"How come I do not see it?"

Ximen Chuixue did not reply. He did not need to. His sword, why would he want other people to see it?

He and his sword, who could possibly see them both?

Ximen Chuixue only asked the young man, "You said you don't want them to kill me? Why did you want them to come here?"

"Because I wanted you to know, I am a person with high status, not only

I can make an appointment to have you appear, I am also able to have two big names to open the way first and wait for me here." The young man in white said, "I know your eyes are way over my head, but I want to at least let you understand that I am not that simple."

"Are you saying that you spent that much money to get them here, just to make me understand your status?"

"That's right."

"In that case, why did you, a person with high status, come here?" Ximen Chuixue asked, "Why did you make an appointment with me here?"

"What do you think?"

"The way I see it, based on your martial art skill, you come only to deliver your life."

The young man in white laughed aloud, "A person like me, young, have a lot of gold, handsome, elegant and unconventional, plus I have a important identity and high status, not to mention rich, if a man like me wanted to die, I am afraid everybody in the world would have been dead."

It was the truth.

"I came here, just so that I can borrow your sword," the young man in white said.

Ximen Chuixue was silent.

He was silent, simply because he did not know what to say.

After being silent for a long time, he finally said one sentence, "My sword can only be used to kill people."

He was silent for a long time before saying that sentence, just because it has been a long time since he said more than one or two words.

When he was young, he used to talk a lot. When he was young, wielding a sword he killed people and crisscrossed Jianghu unhindered; as he spoke those words, it was like gold and iron grating each other, not much of heroic spirit.

But in the young man in white's ears, not only it was still full of heroic spirit, it was charismatic as well. He even applauded.

"Good, a hero's sword, if not for killing people, could it be for killing pigs, killing dogs?" The young man in white said, "I wanted to borrow your sword, it was exactly to kill someone."

"Kill who?"

"Kill someone who want to plot against Lu Xiaofeng's life."

Lu Xiaofeng, how long has it been since he met Lu Xiaofeng? Ever since

the battle on the summit of The Forbidden City, many years have passed.

A sword moving to the east, the immortal flying to the outer space.

The famous hero of the past, where has he gone today?

Not only Ximen Chuixue did not have any tears in his eyes, his expression turned even more grim; he coldly told this young man in white, "If you want to kill someone who wanted to plot against Lu Xiaofeng's life, you shouldn't have come to me."

"Why?"

"Because that person's target is Lu Xiaofeng, not me." Ximen Chuixue said, "That man and I are completely unrelated."

He told this young man further, "If you want to kill him, you just have to find someone."

"Who?"

"Lu Xiaofeng." Ximen Chuixue said, "You want to find the adversary who wanted to kill him, naturally you have to find him."

Not only it was a true statement, it also made sense.

The most important point was: "Lu Xiaofeng should be able to take care

of himself, there is no need for me to put my hand to deal with it."

"If this is something that he can't handle by himself?"

"Then he should just go ahead and die."

"If I forced you to handle this matter on his behalf, would you also want me to die?" the young man asked Ximen Chuixue.

"That's right."

"Do you want me to die right away?"

"That's right."

Ximen Chuixue's answers have always been like that, always been simple and straightforward, precisely like the sword he used to kill.

Chapter 14 – The Lady and the Big Thief

(One)

The young man in white laughed. If Ximen Chuixue said he was going to kill someone, that person's death was already determined. Now Ximen Chuixue said he was going to kill him, unexpectedly he was still able to laugh. Not only he was laughing, his laughter was very cheerful.

Even Embroidered Shoes and Big Bass Drum felt it was very strange.

Stranger still, this young man in white, who had always been mysterious and a bit weird, even said, "Ximen Chuixue, you are not bad. I have always known that you are not bad at all." He said, "If you want to kill people, it would be easier than other people cutting radish. If you want to kill me, naturally it is even easier."

Not only the young man in white's laughter was cheerful, his cheerful demeanor was contagious. "You have just said that my martial art skill is very lacking, although Big Bass Drum and Embroidered Shoes are currently Jianghu's first class assassins, in front of Ximen Chuixue, most likely they won't dare to move."

Big Bass Drum and Embroidered Shoes could not deny, they did not dare to deny.

The young man in white said, in this kind of situation, when I hear that you are going to kill me, I ought to be awfully afraid, but I am not afraid of you, not at all." He asked Ximen Chuixue, "Do you know why?"

Ximen Chuixue looked at him. His gaze was not grim, but it was not warm either. Ximen Chuixue's gaze as he looked at him was like he was not looking at anything, it was like he was gazing at the emptiness in a distance.

"I am not afraid of you, because I know you are not going to kill me, and that you cannot kill me." Unexpectedly that was what the young man said.

Unexpectedly, Ximen Chuixue did not draw his sword either.

"Ximen Chuixue killed people in split second. In split second Ximen Chuixue is able to kill countless people. A puny ordinary people like me, why would I think that Ximen Chuixue will not dare to kill me?" This weird and mysterious young man in white said, "Naturally I have my reasons. At least I have several reasons!"

Nobody could guess his reasons.

When Ximen Chuixue wanted to kill someone, is there any reason in the world that could stop him?

But the young man in white unexpectedly could come up with a reason; not only that, his reason was really effective.

What was his reason?

(Two)

Naturally the reason this young man in white came up was very reasonable, not only that, it was also unexpected.

He seemed to have a lot to say, who would have thought that Ximen Chuixue cut him off, "Actually you don't have a single reason, but I do not have the slightest intention to kill you either."

"Really?"

Of course it was true, whatever Ximen Chuixue said, no one has ever doubted it.

When Ximen Chuixue wants to kill someone, he practically does not need any reason. When Ximen Chuixue does not want to kill someone, he does not need any reason either."

"That is the truth," the young man in white said, "I believe it."

"If Ximen Chuixue wanted to kill you, even though you are a weak woman, even if you are Lu Xiaofeng's lover, even if you are that Beef Soup, you will still be dead under my sword by now."

"Yet I am still not dead?"

"Because of a very good reason. I believe there is no reason the world better than this."

“Oh?”

“Ehm.”

“What reason?” the young man in white asked, “Because of what?”

“Because although you are not a man but a woman, plus you are Lu Xiaofeng’s recent favorite, the Beef Soup, the Cowhide Candy [see Chapter 11], Miss High and Mighty Niu, but I am not Ximen Chuixue.”

The man said, “From head to toe, from the top of my head to the soles of my feet, my entire being, from top to bottom, there is nothing belonging to Ximen Chuixue, not at all.”

Big Bass Drum was dumbstruck. Embroidered Shoes was dumbstruck. Beef soup was dumbstruck. Whether she was really Beef Soup or not, she was dumbstruck; much less she was really Beef Soup.

She knew what kind of man Ximen Chuixue was. This man’s mannerism was Ximen Chuixue’s mannerism; solitary, quiet, and cold. [孤独、寂寞、冷 – gu du, ji mo, leng]

If you think these five characters are not enough to describe Ximen Chuixue, that you have to use thirteen characters to be enough, then other than those five characters solitary, quiet, and cold, you may add eight more characters: proud, proud, merciless, merciless [骄傲、骄傲、无情、无情 – jiao ao, jiao ao, wu qing, wu qing].

A moment ago that man was exactly like that, but now he did not seem to be the same man.

The heaven above the earth below, there was only one Ximen Chuixue, never to be duplicated. The heaven above the earth below, there was only one Sword God, never to be duplicated.

This kind of man, how could he say such thing? If Ximen Chuixue really wanted someone to die, how could that person live until now?

"Now I know for sure that you are absolutely not Ximen Chuixue." Miss Niu stared at this man and asked, "If you are not him, who are you?"

She believed this man was Ximen Chuixue, just because she had already felt some kind of pride and desolation that was unique and unmatched, that only Ximen Chuixue could exude; she had also felt the thick and fierce sword aura that was equally unique and unmatched.

Apart from Ximen Chuixue, who else could make others feel this way?

"Ximen Chuixue's face actually looks like dead person, not only it was deathly pale without any trace of blood, it does not have any emotion either." Miss Niu said, "The most important point is that when most people see a man wearing white clothes, as white as snow, while wearing a long and narrow sword in black sheathe, their legs would turn into jelly; who would dare to stare at that person's face?"

Her conclusion was: "Therefore, in theory, masquerading as Ximen Chuixue is not a very difficult thing."

The theory is correct, however, between theory and fact, usually there is still some distance. Therefore, Miss Niu continued, "In reality, masquerading as Ximen Chuixue is an extremely difficult thing."

"Why?"

"Because of his sword aura and his murderous aura."

It doesn't matter who, but anybody who 'saw' Ximen Chuixue would immediately feel his dense, severe and pressing sword aura and murderous aura. Plus he would be immediately intimidated.

"Therefore, in this world, the number of people who could impersonate Ximen Chuixue was really not many. In my opinion, there are no more than three people."

"Which three?"

"Western Region's Yu Luocha, Lu Xiaofeng, and Sikong Zhaixing." Miss Niu said, "Western Region's Yu Luocha is the Jiaozhu [Cult Leader] of that Devil Cult of the Western Region, Sikong Zhaixing is that little thief, and Lu Xiaofeng is the Four Eyebrows Lu Xiaofeng."

"Ever since that Silver Hook Casino case, Western Region's Yu Luocha never seems to reappear." The man in white said, "Besides, he seldom appeared in Jianghu anyway."

"Looks like you are right."

"Therefore, naturally I can't be him."

"Looks like you can't be."

"And naturally I can't be that super-b@stard Lu Xiaofeng either."

"I don't think you look like him!"

"Therefore, I am afraid I am Sikong Zhaixing."

"I am afraid so."

The man heaved a very, very deep sigh. "Looks like your vision is not bad, it's a pity you still made a tiny bit of mistake."

"What is it?"

"Sikong Zhaixing is not a little thief, he is a big thief. A super big thief."

"Not only he is a super big thief, he seems to be the thief king of kings. Even Lu Xiaofeng would have a very big headache whenever he saw him." Miss Niu said, "Someone who is able to make Lu Xiaofeng crawling on the ground, digging six hundred and eighty earthworms, other than him, there doesn't seem to be a second person."

Sikong Zhaixing roared in laughter. The chilling murderous aura of a moment ago had already vanished completely.

It was only now that Miss Niu believed Lu Xiaofeng; this thief king of kings was indeed a genius, his talent in disguise was exactly like Lu Xiaofeng has told her. "I was once told that in the Mansion of Spirits, Lu Xiaofeng had seen a man who could disguise himself as a dog, but this man said that his skill was not even one third of what Sikong Zhaixing is capable of doing."

Big Bass Drum and Embroidered Shoes were dumbfounded.

Although they have heard Sikong Zhaixing's name, given the fact that this thief king of kings' reputation in Jianghu was resounding, not at all below Ximen Chuixue's, but they had never thought that this thief king would be able to masquerade the Sword God; moreover, he was able to deceive them.

They also understood the art of disguise, since none of the people in their line of work did not understand the art of disguise.

It was actually one of the most fundamental requirements for people who wanted to take assassination as their profession.

It's just that they could not imagine someone was able to completely change his imposing manner and his voice in a flash like that.

Changing one's appearance is not difficult, changing one's voice is difficult. One must first learn how to control the muscle of his throat, a

skill that existed only in legends.

Therefore, without saying anything Big Bass Drum took out a stack of banknotes from his pocket, with both hands he brought it to Miss Niu's presence, arranged it on the ground, and then, just like a very fat butterfly, he flew away.

Embroidered Shoes did not say anything either; she simply left. When she walked away, naturally her footsteps were a lot lighter than when she arrived.

Sikong Zhaixing watched her leaving with a smile on his face. Suddenly he asked Miss Niu, "Why didn't you stop her?"

"Why would I want to stop her?"

"Because she seemed to be forgetting to leave something behind!" Sikong Zhaixing looked at the banknotes Big Bass Drum left behind, "This sort of thing is usually not easily forgotten; even if she forgot, you should not forget."

He added as an explanation, "Especially since both of you are women."

"Although my experience with women is not as extensive as Lu Xiaofeng's, it can't be considered too little either." Sikong Zhaixing explained further, "Based on my experience, once things like gold, silver, pearls and jewels enter a woman's hand, it would be like a jar of thirty-year old Nu'erhong [blushing young maiden] wine entering Lu Xiaofeng's belly; if you want him to spit it back out, I am afraid it would be more

difficult than ascending the heavens."

"This time you are wrong," Miss Niu said.

"Oh?"

"Exactly because I am a woman that I did not stop her."

"Why?"

"... because I forgot." Miss Niu's laughter was as pure as a little white lily.
"Because I practically forgot to give her the banknotes."

"You did not forget to pay Big Bass Drum, yet you forgot to pay her."

"Ehm."

"Why?"

"Because she is a woman, and I am also a woman." Miss Niu said,
"Others thought that women only guard against man; that is wrong."

"Could it be that the ones women guard against the most are other women?" Sikong Zhaixing asked, "Could it be that women only guard against women?"

"That is correct."

Women always understand other women a bit better, isn't that right?

"Now I only have one thing that I don't understand." Beef Soup asked the thief king, "I was wondering if you could tell me."

"I could." Sikong Zhaixing said, "Although I am not Lu Xiaofeng, I also cannot refuse a pretty and lovely little girl such as you."

Beef Soup laughed, "At least you have one thing that is the same as his, your mouth is as sweet as his."

You have tasted his sweet mouth, do you want to taste my mouth as well?

Not only Miss Niu was pretty and lovely, she was also very smart; she knew what bad men like Lu Xiaofeng and Sikong Zhaixing had in their mind, even before they say it.

Therefore, she did not give these bad men a chance to speak; immediately she continued, "I asked Honest Monk to write a letter to Ximen Chuixue to make an appointment with him. How did you read it?"

"How do you know that I have read it?"

"If you hadn't, why did you impersonate Ximen Chuixue and come here?"

"The reason seems to be very simple." Sikong Zhaixing sighed again, "I believe you must be thinking of something like that." His sigh was very deep, "Too bad this time you are wrong."

"Are you saying that it was not like that?"

"It wasn't."

"If it wasn't like that, then what was it?"

"That question, I do not want to answer it just yet," Sikong Zhaixing said, "Right now I just want to eat a big bowl of piping hot beef soup."

"Which I have to personally cook."

Sikong Zhaixing laughed aloud. "This time you are right."

(Three)

A bowl of beef soup was served; it was indeed piping hot. Not only that, it was brought in an especially big, fancy bowl. The soup was congealing even thicker than rice porridge. The meat in the soup was from the best three parts of a cow, and the cow was the choicest of the herd.

Such a fine bowl of beef soup, if to it was added an assembly of fine cuisine such as two or three batches of hand-pulled noodle, a dish of Yunnan big-head vegetable, a dish of dried orchid tofu and a bowl of

shelled peanuts to down Shanxi's old Fenjiu wine, even if someone offered to exchange it with 286 dishes of entirely Chinese cuisines, you may want to say, "I don't want to change." [Translator's note: I am not sure about all the food's names; I don't even know what they are.]

Naturally you don't want to change. If you do, then you are a turtle.

Sikong Zhaixing was not a turtle, neither was he a cuckold; Sikong Zhaixing loved good food, he was a connoisseur. And not just an ordinary connoisseur either; he was an expert.

He drank a few mouthfuls of soup, ate a few pieces of meat, closed his eyes, and slowly exhaled from his nose a sigh of contentment. "Beef tendon, small flower-patterned rolled tendon, three-part fat of strips of ribs, plus a bit of white beef brisket and beef shank," Sikong Zhaixing said with a sigh, "This beef is very tender, was it fed with wine mixed with wheat since it was young?" he asked Miss Niu. [Again, my apology, I am not a food connoisseur.]

"Yes."

"Isn't it true that this bowl of beef soup has been cooked for four, five sichen [i.e. 8 to 10 hours]?"

"Yes."

"But I barely sat down and your beef soup was immediately brought over!"

"When I was going to ask someone a favor, I always had beef soup ready." Miss Niu said, "Because my [maternal] grandma often told me something, and I never forget it."

"What did she tell you?"

"She often told me that if I want to grab a man's heart, the fastest way is to go through his stomach."

"She said it well." Sikong Zhaixing burst out laughing, "Your [maternal] grandpa must be luckier than most men in the world!"

With a sweet smile Miss Niu said, "But he is also fatter than most men in the world."

Sikong Zhaixing laughed. Miss Niu also laughed. But both of them suddenly stopped laughing. You looked at me, I looked at you.

The first to open his mouth was naturally Sikong Zhaixing; because he had eaten the beef soup. Usually the beef soup cannot be eaten in vain.

"What kind of person Ximen Chuixue is, you should already know." He asked Miss Niu, "Could it be that his letter can be seen by someone else?"

"No."

"Therefore, I have not seen the letter either." Sikong Zhaixing said, "I only saw a monk, an honest monk who is not honest."

Miss Niu laughed, "That monk does seem like he is not too honest."

"But that monk is smarter than you."

"In which aspect he is smarter than me?"

"He knew that after Ximen Chuixue read the letter, that letter will immediately become like the heart of a woman who committed suicide."

"What do you mean?"

"Why would a woman want to kill herself?"

"Because her heart had already broken into pieces, it had been torn to shreds by a man."

"That letter will be the same." Sikong Zhaixing laughed, "So it must have been torn to shreds by a man. And that man is precisely Ximen Chuixue."

Miss Niu also laughed; she could not help but laugh.

"The monk has calculated that the Great Swordsman Ximen definitely would not want to make an appointment with a nameless character, because that Great Swordsman's eyes will always look above their heads."

"If such a Great Swordsman must meet this kind of appointment, perhaps he won't even have any time to have children."

"Since he did not come, you came." Miss Niu asked Sikong Zhaixing, "But why would you want to come?"

"Because I am Lu Sandan's [lit. three eggs] friend; Ximen Chuixue does not go to save him, naturally I must go."

"Lu Sandan?" Miss Niu asked in bewilderment, "Who is Lu Sandan?"

"Lu Sandan is Lu Xiaofeng," Sikong Zhaixing said, "Because not only he is a b@stard [orig. hundan – muddled egg], he is also a poor wretch [orig. qiong guang dan – totally poor egg], and sometimes he is even an idiot [orig. ben dan – stupid egg]."

Miss Niu wanted to laugh, but she simply could not laugh.

"This time you are wrong," in deadly earnest she told Sikong Zhaixing, "Lu Xiaofeng is not an egg; he could be anything, but I can assure you he is in no way an egg."

"Why?"

Miss Niu laughed again.

"Have you ever seen an egg grows eyebrows?" she asked Sikong Zhaixing, "Have you ever seen an egg with four eyebrows?"

Sikong Zhaixing has never surrendered to anybody, even having somersault competition with Lu Xiaofeng he did not surrender.

But this time, he surrendered.

Chapter 15 – Mysterious couple in the corner

Ximen Chuixue had actually never blown snow; it does not matter where the snow has fallen, he could not possibly blow it. In the world, most probably nobody has ever blown snow.

The one thing that Ximen Chuixue blew was blood. [Reminder: 'xue' in Ximen Chuixue's name means snow; blood is also 'xue' (different character).]

The blood on his sword, the blood of the enemy.

The water in the basin was still warm, it still carried the fragrance of Cape jasmine flowers.

Ximen Chuixue has already cleaned up every cun [approx. one inch] of his body. Right now he was changing his clothes and tying his hair, and trimming his fingernails.

He had prepared for himself a brand new set of clothes. From the inner underwear to the outer long gown, everything was white, white as snow.

He had even fasted for two days, by eating only the purest and simplest food and drinking only pure plain water.

Because he was going to do something, the most sacred and pure and holy thing.

He was going to kill someone.

(Two)

Zhuangyuan Lou[1] was the largest restaurant in this area. They had the best business, the largest crowd, the liveliest atmosphere, but also the loudest noise. Especially in 'rice mouth' time.

'Rice mouth' means the time when everybody needs to eat.

And right now it was the 'rice mouth' time. The upstairs of Zhuangyuan Lou has always been as noisy as chestnuts being sautéed in a big wok, as lively as a big wok full of assorted vegetables; but right now all noises suddenly died down.

Because two people were walking up the stairs.

The first person coming upstairs was a beautiful, albeit a bit wild, girl; healthy and sturdy. Her entire body exuded bounciness and wild nature; yet her wild looking was extremely attractive.

Such girl ought to attract attention, no matter where she was.

But today it was different. People at the restaurant today did not even seem to notice her.

Because in another instant the second person coming upstairs immediately drew everybody's gaze toward him.

The man's face was pale, gaunt, cold, and proud. His clothes were as white as snow.

This man's body seemed to exude cold aura that was even colder than ice and snow, that was able to freeze everybody's voice and smile.

These two people were, naturally, Sikong Zhaixing and Beef Soup.

It does not matter where, but each time Sikong Zhaixing appeared, he always drew people's attention to him. But actually he did not like to be noticed at all.

He preferred situations where no one paid him any attention, so that he could do what he wanted to do in peace and quiet.

What he wanted to do was usually 'to steal'.

A man who was always drawing other people's attention, how could he steal? How did he achieve the title 'thief king of kings'?

If a man who was always drawing other people's attention intended to steal, he should not appear in a brightly lit restaurant, because by now he would be already lying in a small and narrow, dark cell, hoping that tomorrow early morning there would be a bit of sunshine coming from that little window high up above him so that he could catch some bedbugs, some lice.

Someone who claimed to have a lot of experience once said that if you only have two or three lice on you, their bite would give you a terrible itch, so terrible that you wish to die. But if on your body you have two or three hundred lice, they could bite whatever they liked, and you won't itch; even if they bite until they die, you would not feel the slightest itch.

Do you believe it?

Was Sikong Zhaixing a man who was always drawing other people's attention? Nobody would know, because nobody has ever seen his real identity.

Everybody only knew that whenever and wherever he appeared, he would take the appearance that a [paternal] grandfather would not love dearly and a [maternal] grandmother would not fond of. Even if he kneeled down ten thousand times, begging other people to give him a second glance, nobody would want to look at him twice.

But today it was different.

Today he did not look like a wretched slob that anybody would be disinclined to look, because today he was not Sikong Zhaixing.

Today he could even say that he was not a nobody, because today he was Ximen Chuixue. The unique and unmatched [orig. 'only one, no second'] Ximen Chuixue.

The heaven above, the earth below, the one and only sword.

(Three)

Sword hanging on his waist, just like an arrow on the bow.

Before the age of thirty, Ximen Chuixue's sword was always hanging diagonally across his back, fastened to his body using some kind of unusually ingenious, yet practical, knot, in a long and narrow black sheath which appearance looked strange and antique.

Because he felt that only by carrying the sword this way he could maintain his movement at the sharpest state. It would also enable him to draw his sword the fastest.

But now, 'sharp' and 'fast' were not his focus.

In these aspects, he had already surpassed it, he had already surpassed himself, surpassed his sword.

He had surpassed the limits of his own self, he had surpassed the limits of his sword.

'Surpass' is by no means a simple matter. It is not easy at all. Anything that you want to surpass, you must be willing to pay the price.

Considerable price.

Taking a bath, changing clothes, fixing his hair, trimming his nails; these were originally things that Ximen Chuixue would never do himself.

Famous actress, famous courtesans, famous women of various capacities could do this kind of things for him, but he would not do it himself.

Because he was a noble among people, a god among the swords.

Even Lu Xiaofeng once said, "That man Ximen Chuixue, he is basically not a human."

Things that everyone loves, he did not love; things that everyone does, he did not do. He appeared to be detached far away from the human world. His sword has cut him off from the world.

He himself preferred it this way.

The unexpected thing was, he 'came across' something; he came across a girl, he met a girl who pulled him back to the human world.

Anybody would find no way to avoid this kind of thing, even Ximen Chuixue was no exception.

Therefore, he had no choice but did some 'humanly' things:

Met, fell in love, got married, settled down, and had a child.

So much so that he grew feeling just like ordinary human being.

Therefore, he was nearly defeated, he nearly died; defeat equals to death. In the battle 'On the night of the full moon, on the summit of violent forbidden' [see my note in Chapter 13] he nearly died under Master of White Cloud Castle Ye Gucheng's Outer Heaven Angel. [Translator's note: (One) now we have confirmation that Chapter 13 was referring to 'that' duel, which puzzles me to no end – didn't Ximen Chuixue see Lu Xiaofeng in Book 4, Book 5 and Book 6? (Two) 'Outer Heaven Angel', orig. 'immortal flying to the outer space'.]

Ximen Chuixue may die, but he must not be defeated.

Ximen Chuixue's sword can never be defeated; moreover, it will become one of the legends of mankind.

It was a fact that he must protect, because not only it was his responsibility, it was his destiny as well.

Therefore, he must stay in the 'godly' state; the god of swords.

Therefore, he must separate himself from mankind.

Therefore, after his wife gave birth to a child, after his most beloved woman gave birth to his only child, his own flesh and blood, he separated himself from them.

It was the price he had to pay.

Ximen Chuixue silently strapped his sword; he silently walked out the narrow door.

Regardless of where the door is located, it could be considered belong to him; it belonged to him alone.

Because he was Ximen Chuixue.

Because the door was the door between life and death.

Outside the moon was bright.

(Four)

Sikong Zhaixing has already ordered his meal.

The waiter has been waiting respectfully, standing bolt-upright waiting for his order. Although as he stood straight his legs trembled a little.

But after he heard the order, his countenance changed slightly.

Sikong Zhaixing's order was –

“A plate of stir-fried green vegetables, a plate of plain cooked tofu, two plain boiled eggs, two plain mantou [steamed bun], a pot of plain water.”

In this world, there are countless cities, towns, and villages; in each

place there are countless inns, restaurants and stalls that sell wine, sell meals; nobody knows how many waiters are there in all these places.

One thing that we can be sure of, no matter where, no matter which inn, restaurant or food stall, no matter what kind of waiter, upon hearing a customer ordering such 'dishes', their countenance would definitely change. It would be strange indeed if his countenance does not change.

The waiter in Zhuangyuan Lou was staring at Sikong Zhaixing, as if a young, rich playboy had suddenly found himself to be a eunuch. Furthermore, there was a woman sitting next to the eunuch.

Although Beef Soup did not look particularly surprised, she did not look particularly upset either; in short, her expression did not noticeably change. Yet she could not help asking Sikong Zhaixing, "What did you just order for us?"

"Are you deaf?"

"I am not."

"What I have just ordered, you did not hear?"

"I heard it." Big Miss Niu said, "I just have some suspicions."

"What suspicions?"

"I am suspecting you." Beef Soup said, "I suspect whether you are really

the thief king of kings who disperse gold like stone."

"Oh?"

"I heard that although that thief king has never stolen anything valuable, but he has more money than anybody else."

"Why?"

"Because the stuffs that he stole, he stole it because someone asked him to." Beef Soup said, "And anybody who wanted him to steal something must pay him lots and lots of money. I heard that once he stole a chamber pot, and the man who asked him to steal unexpectedly had to pay him fifty thousand taels."

She asked Thief King Sikong, "Is there such thing?"

Sikong Zhaixing sighed, "If a pretty and cute girl told me that there is such thing, how can I say no?"

Beef Soup laughed.

Her laughter did not seem to look like a cow, it did not look like meat, did not look like soup even more. [Translator's note: beef soup, orig. 'niu rou tang' – cow meat soup.]

If someone says that when she laughed she looked like a bowl of soup, then this bowl of soup was definitely not beef soup; rather, it was a bowl

of sweet, sweet jujube fruit and lotus seed soup.

"If by stealing one chamber pot he made fifty thousand taels, wouldn't this thief king be a very rich man by now?"

"He would have."

"Usually a rich man is a bit more miserly! But this man is an exception."

"Oh?"

"What's more, he spends money like Lu Xiaofeng; sometimes he even spends money faster than Lu Xiaofeng."

"Knowing how to earn money is not a special skill; knowing how to earn and how to spend is." Sikong Zhaixing said, "Knowing how to spend but not how to earn, that is a scoundrel; knowing how to earn without knowing how to spend, that is a b@stard!"

Big Miss Niu laughed.

"Being a scoundrel seems to be a bit better than being a b@stard!"

"That's for sure!"

"Therefore, you are a b@stard." Miss Niu said, "You are not a scoundrel who know how to spend but not how to earn, you are not a thief king

who earn by the plateful and bowlful either, you are no more than a big b@stard who know how to earn without knowing how to spend, a super big b@stard."

Sikong Zhaixing looked as if he was dumbfounded from the curses; in all his life, he had never been scolded like this by anybody.

He was the Thief King, just like Ximen Chuixue was the Sword God, just like Lu Xiaofeng was the Lu Xiaofeng.

For people like them, they are not cursing others, that can be considered polite already; how could they let others curse them?

Was this Big Miss Niu drunk?

"Are you drunk?"

"All I drank was plain water, how can plain water make me drunk?" Big Miss Niu said, "I just feel strange, someone who can make fifty thousand taels just by stealing chamber pot, how can he, when having dinner with a pretty and cute woman, only order plain?"

"Plain?"

"Plain vegetables, plain tofu, plain mantou, plain water." Big Miss Niu sighed, "The way I see it, that Honest Monk, who is not honest, must be eating a bit better than you do."

"Why?"

"Eating like this, how could he have any strength to produce little monk?"

Sikong Zhaixing did not laugh; he sighed instead.

"Now I know why that Lu Xiaoji [little chick] likes you." Sikong Zhaixing said, "The way you speak seems to be cast from the same mold as his."

"Actually, is he Lu Sandan [three eggs] or Lu Xiaoji?" [See Chapter 14 on 'three eggs'.]

"He is both." Sikong Zhaixing said, "Sometimes he is also Lu Xiaoniao [little bird], Lu Xiaogou [little dog]."

"I kind of understand the Lu Xiaoniao thing, because he indeed flies like a little bird."

"Humph!"

"But I don't understand the Lu Xiaogou bit." Miss Niu asked, "How could anybody call him Lu Xiaogou?"

"Because his nose is even more potent than a dog's; there's a pile of shit eight thousand li away, he can still smell it."

Big Miss Niu wanted to laugh, but she restrained herself; she stared at Sikong Zhaixing with straight face for half a day.

“What about you? Are you, after all, Sikong Zhaixing, or Mandi Chishi?”

[Translator’s note: Sikong literally means ‘managing emptiness, *i.e.* sky’, Zhaixing means ‘picking/plucking star’. Mandi means ‘all over the earth’, Chishi means ‘eating crap/sh1t’.]

Sikong Zhaixing was taken aback. “How can I be Mandi Chishi?”

Naturally Big Miss Niu had her reasons.

“Full earth [mandi] matches with empty sky [sikong], eating crap [chisi] matches with picking star [zhaixing], every word is superior.” Miss Niu said, “These things you eat are not much better than dog sh1t.”

“This time you are wrong.” Sikong Zhaixing was not angry, “I ordered these things, just because right now I am practically not Sikong Zhaixing.”

“Who are you then?”

“Ximen Chuixue.” Sikong Zhaixing said, “Full earth matches with western gate [ximen], eating crap matches with blowing snow [chuixue], aren’t the words match very well?”

“The match is indeed extremely well,” suddenly someone said, “It is well enough that you are qualified to eat a big pile of dog sh1t, plus a chop of

a saber.”

There was a table in the corner of the restaurant, on it sat a couple of husband and wife, they were both very old. The husband was slightly built and withered, the wife was rather plump; the husband was frowning and worried, the wife’s face was covered in smiles.

There are actually a lot of husbands and wives like that in the world; if both the husband and the wife enthusiastically wanted to do ‘something’, the husband usually got the shorter end of the stick. Husbands who wanted their wives to be happy, oftentimes they tend to end up as slightly built, withered man with yellow faces and emaciated bodies.

This husband and his wife were originally sitting in the far corner of the restaurant, all of a sudden the husband with yellow face and emaciated body was sitting on the table next to Sikong Zhaixing and Big Miss Niu.

Naturally, those words about eating sh1t and getting a chop came from him.

Naturally, Sikong Zhaixing simply had to ask him, “Did you say that I had to receive a chop of a saber?”

“Yes.”

“Why do I have to receive a chop?”

“Because you are not Ximen Chuixue.” The old man said, “If you were Ximen Chuixue, then I am Mandi Chishi.”

Sikong Zhaixing was dumbfounded again.

This old man was sitting very far away, while he and Beef Soup were speaking so softly that even anybody sitting on the next table would not hear it. Yet this old man did.

Who was this old man?

If Sikong Zhaixing knew who this old man was, I am afraid he might faint immediately.

-- The heaven above, the earth below, what could possibly make Sikong Zhaixing fainted?

[1] Zhuangyuan is the top scorer in palace examination, lou refers to building with more than one story.

Chapter 16 – Sikong Zhaixing plucked some kind of star

(One)

If there was anybody who said that Sikong Zhaixing's disguising skill was not number one under the heavens, then perhaps nobody else in this world would dare to admit that his disguising skill was number one under the heavens.

'Disguising skill'. These words sound very mysterious, people always feel that it is related somehow to some magical secret, and often involved Jianghu people in some exceptionally treacherous and sinister shady business.

Actually, disguising skill involves no more than a very common technique. A very beautiful girl performing on stage could turn herself into a man with big beard. Isn't it also a 'disguising skill'?

This sort of thing, like many other things, is easy to learn, but is very difficult to master.

So, what stage has Sikong Zhaixing's disguising skill reached?

There is no way to describe it, and there is no way to explain it either. Just like Lu Xiaofeng's fingers, Ximen Chuixue's sword, nobody could ever describe what stage they had reached.

No one can even imagine.

But at least we can determine something: there is a limit to disguising skill.

In very simple words:

-- There is no disguising skill under the heavens that enable someone to completely disguise himself as someone else, while fooling people closest to him, friends and relatives.

The most profound disguising skill can only disguise someone as another person who practically did not exist, or perhaps someone who did not have any friends or relatives who could recognize him up close; in other words, someone that no one else would be able to recognize.

If one could reach this stage, then the disguising skill does have its worth; it is valuable enough that thousands and tens of thousands people take painstaking effort to learn it.

Sikong Zhaixing's disguising skill has, no doubt, reached this stage. It even surpassed that stage. So much so that even Lu Xiaofeng did not recognize him.

Being able to make someone more-crafty-than-ghost like Lu Xiaofeng to not recognize him, his skill could be considered very good.

Yet right now this little old man who was originally sitting far away in the corner was able to recognize him.

What do you think? How good was this old man's ability?

The old man's skill was superb, so good that he shocked Sikong Zhaixing.

More surprisingly, the old man was able to hear them whispering in a very, very low voices, across a noisy room, separated by quite a few tables.

And unexpectedly Sikong Zhaixing was not able to tell this man's background. Faced with this kind of matter, how could Sikong Zhaixing not be shocked?

Finally he surrendered. He sighed, and then let out a wry smile.

"I admire you." Sikong Zhaixing said to the little old man, "I know that you are also in disguise, but I can't tell who you are, while you can see through me."

The little old man's mouth curled; it was not clear whether he was smiling, or he was not smiling. He only told Sikong Zhaixing, "I don't need your admiration, and I don't want you to know who I am, I don't want to know who you are even more." The little old man said, "I only know that you are definitely not Ximen Chuixue."

The little old man talked to Sikong Zhaixing in a very nasty way, "Whether you are Zhang San, Li Si [i.e. 'Tom, Dick or Harry'], turtle or b@stard, I don't care. All I know is that you are not Ximen Chuixue, and that is enough." The little old man said, "I am afraid I am not the only one

who knows this."

Unexpectedly, he still continued, "I am afraid people in Jianghu with a bit faster and more abundant news network will never believe that at this moment Ximen Chuixue could accompany a young and pretty girl sitting in this place, eating plain mantou."

"Why?"

"Because people in Jianghu with a bit faster and more abundant news network all know that right now Ximen Chuixue is not in Jiangnan [south of Yangtze river], neither is he in the Central Plains." This little old man said, "Under such circumstances, how can there be a Ximen Chuixue in this place?"

There is only one answer to this kind of question. The Ximen Chuixue in this place must be a fake.

The little old man said, "Only under such circumstances was I able to tell that you are definitely not Ximen Chuixue." He said, "Otherwise, how could I tell? Based on your disguising skill, how could anyone see through you?"

Anything gets through me except horse fart[1]. This is the truth that has never changed throughout all ages, even someone like Sikong Zhaixing could not but succumb to it.

And now he has indeed succumbed to it.

Now he already felt that the little old man was not as suspicious as before, so much so that he even started to think that the little old man has grown a little cuter.

It's just that he still could not refrain from asking, "If Ximen Chuixue is really not in Jiangnan, and he is not in the Central Plains, then to which 'seeing-ghost' place did he go?"

"He indeed went to a 'seeing-ghost' place."

Sikong Zhaixing looked at Big Miss Niu, Big Miss Niu looked at Sikong Zhaixing, the two of them asked at nearly the same time, "Is this 'seeing-ghost' place outside the Wall?"

"That's right."

"Is this 'seeing-ghost' place a small town called Huangshi?"

"That's right."

Big Miss Niu looked at Sikong Zhaixing, Sikong Zhaixing looked at Big Miss Niu, the two of them were stumped for words.

The one having the last word was unexpectedly not a woman, but a man. Unexpectedly Big Miss Niu shut her mouth tight.

"Although on the outside Ximen Chuixue often drinks only plain water, and eats only the simplest food, he is actually a very particular person,

and he is a man who understands how to enjoy life very much.”

Sikong Zhaixing tried to probe the little old man, “This time why did he leave his mountain villa that is covered with flowers like an embroidered work and is covering thousands of mu [unit area, approx. 1/15 of a hectare], to travel tens of thousands li away to a ghost place where the flowers are not fragrant, the birds do not sing, the fowls do not fly, the dogs do not jump, and the hares do not defecate?”

No answer. He was asked back instead, “Do you know that once he traveled tens of thousands li just to avenge a total stranger?”

“I seem to have heard it.”

This fact, not only Sikong Zhaixing has heard it, probably everybody in Jianghu has heard it.

“One time for the sake of ‘One Saber subduing Nine Divisions’ [referring to division of China during earliest dynasties] Zhao Gang, he rushed on horseback for three days and three nights to kill ‘Lightning Saber’ Hong Tao.”

Sikong Zhaixing said, “Hong Tao’s ‘Jade-chain Lightning Eight-Saber’ was deadly, those who came under his saber seldom escape alive, while Zhao Gang was a complete stranger whom Ximen Chuixue had never met before.” Sikong Zhaixing sighed, “Thus it is clear that our merciless Great Swordsman would often do something like this for an inexplicable reason.”

He asked the little old man, "Would you say that was what he did?"

"In all sense of the word." The little old man's answer was definite, "Everybody would do something for an inexplicable reason from time to time; even you are no exception."

"Ximen Chuixue went to Huangshi this time, is it also for an inexplicable reason?"

"That's right."

"What was the reason?"

"This time he also went for someone else's sake." The little old man said, "It's just that this time it is a rare instance because he broke something."

"What did he break?"

"He broke his own rule."

"I still don't understand."

"When he put his hands to do something, very seldom was it because of a friend, because he practically does not have friends, and the friends that he has never asked him to do anything." The little old man said, "Therefore, whenever he does something, almost always it was for a stranger."

"I always thought that whatever he is doing, he is doing it for his own sake." Sikong Zhaixing said, "For all my life I have never seen anyone with more ego than he does." He explained, "By ego, I am talking about selfishness."

The little old man laughed.

Sikong Zhaixing looked down upon Ximen Chuixue, this is a fact that many people in Jianghu knew about. The reason was because Ximen Chuixue also looked down on him.

"Maybe what you are saying is true, but this time, I know for sure that he is not doing it for himself, and it is not for a stranger either." The little old man said, "This time, unexpectedly, he is doing it for a friend!"

Sikong Zhaixing downed a big bowl of water as if it was a bowl of wine. "Our Great Master the Sword God can also do something like that for a friend?" he asked with a cold laugh.

"Occasionally."

"Fortunately his friends are not many." Sikong Zhaixing coldly said, "The number of people he killed is a hundred times greater than the number of his friends."

"Perhaps it is more than a hundred times." The little old man said while stifling a laugh, "Because it is very likely that he only have one friend."

"And this friend of his is naturally that Lu Xiaogou."

"This Lu Xiaogou is, of course, Lu Xiaoji, Lu Xiaoniao, Lu Xiaochong [little worm], Lu Xiaogui [little demon], Lu Sandan." The little old man said, "It takes a lot of chicken, worms, birds, demons and eggs to make one Lu Xiaofeng."

In this short time that they were talking, Big Miss Niu has been displaying her very gentle and refined manners, just like a real well-bred young lady of a distinguished family.

But suddenly she sprang up just like a mother cat whose tail has just been stepped on by someone, and stared at the little old man. She started for a moment, but then suddenly she sat back down, gently and meekly, and gently and meekly shut her mouth again, without saying a single sentence, without saying a single word.

We can even compliment her, because this time she did not even let out a single fart.

The one who farted was someone else.

"Are you saying that for Lu Xiaofeng, Ximen Chuixue has rushed thousands of li to that place where the birds do not lay eggs, the small town of Huangshi?" Sikong Zhaixing asked the mysterious little old man, "Are you farting?"

"I am not."

In a very modest manner the little old man said, "In your presence, I do

not even have the qualifications to fart. Even if I wanted to fart, I must hold it back. If someone is farting here, it can't be me."

If it was not him, then it must be Sikong Zhaixing.

(Two)

This moment Ximen Chuixue was pushing the door to go out.

Outside the sand was yellow like gold. There was also the bright crescent moon that looked like a wheel.

Sikong Zhaixing started to eat his mantou.

He ate mantou, because his tummy was hungry, he was so hungry that he felt like dying. When he was racking his brain, his tummy would get hungry real fast.

But no matter how he racked his brains, he still could not figure out who the little old man, who was sitting in front of him, really was, and how he got to know all these things.

Even if he racked his brains to an extent where he had to eat thirty-eight thousand mantou, he still could not figure it out.

Yet the little old man knew what was going on in his mind, he even knew who he was.

"Mr. Sikong, now can you invite this beautiful Miss to eat something that is not plain?"

Sikong Zhaixing nearly jumped in surprise. "What did you say? What kind of man is Mr. Sikong?"

"Sikong Zhaixing perhaps is not a man." The little old man did not let Sikong Zhaixing get angry; he immediately continued, "Sikong Zhaixing perhaps is several dozen, several hundred, several thousand men; because this thief king of kings' disguising skill is the most exquisite under the heavens, no one could reach up to it."

It was an old truth.

-- Anything gets through me except horse fart! If an old truth did not make sense, how could it survive and be called 'old'?

Much less this time the little old man's horse fart was unceasing; it continued ringing.

"I know you are not Ximen Chuixue, because I know that he is outside the Wall." The little old man said, "I know you are Sikong Zhaixing, just because I know that other than Sikong Zhaixing, there is no other person in the world who could pass as Ximen Chuixue, plus no one dared."

Sikong Zhaixing laughed, he already found out that the longer he looked at the little old man, the more he felt that he looked kind of cute.

Question is: who was this little old man?

If the question is not answered, even if Sikong Zhaixing was really a horse, and his butt was licked thirty-eight thousand times, he still could not let this little old man go.

Therefore, he simply had to ask, "Now you already know who I am, may I know who you are?"

This secretive and mysterious little old man's reply was shocking; unexpectedly his answer was very clear-cut, "You may."

"I may?" Sikong Zhaixing did not seem to believe his own ears, "Really I may?"

"Really." The little old man's reply was still that clear-cut, "When I say you may, you certainly may."

"In that case, can you tell me now?"

Once time the little old man's reply was shocking, because his answer was, "I can't."

"You can't?" While staring at the little old man, Sikong Zhaixing's eyes seemed to be ready to fall out. "Why not?"

"Because I don't even know who I am; how can I tell you?"

"Aren't there one or two people in the world who could tell me who you

are?"

"Probably there is one."

"Who?"

"It's the little old granny who is sitting on the corner."

All little old grannies are the same, they will look a lot like that little old granny.

Maybe she was not too old, or perhaps she was beginning to get old; maybe she was very pretty, or perhaps she was practically not pretty at all.

Whether a woman will become an old granny or not, it has nothing to do with these things.

Whether this little old granny was old or young, whether she was pretty or ugly, nobody knows. But anybody who saw her sitting quietly, properly and peacefully, in a safe corner, even if that person has never seen a woman before, he would think that she was a little old granny.

Sikong Zhaixing has never considered her as anything other than a little old granny. But now he suddenly felt that this little old granny was not a little old granny at all.

He had not seen the flaw, but he already felt something.

-- When Lu Xiaofeng realized her disguise, it was precisely because of this kind of feeling.

Sikong Zhaixing understood this logic.

He knew that this time he was not facing a person at all, but a star.

Just like he, himself, was also some kind of star.

By the time he knew what kind of star he was picking [reminder: zhaixing means picking star], he had really passed out.

[1] 'qian chuan wan chuan, ma pi bu chuan' – lit. thousand times bore through, ten thousand times bore through; horse's fart (i.e. flattery) does not bore through (Courtesy of Sunnysnow during the Eagle Shooting Hero translation project.)

Chapter 17 – Bathing water inside the tent

(One)

Later on Big Miss Niu told her friends.

“I saw it with my own eyes that day,” she said, “I saw Sikong Zhaixing walked over, he went to the little old granny, and the little old granny bent her finger, beckoning him to come over, and then she spoke a few words on his ear.”

“And then what happened?”

“And then I saw that Sikong Zhaixing, who disguised himself as Ximen Chuixue, pretending to be cold and emotionless, his expression changed instantly, his eye bulged as he stared at that little old granny, as if his eyeballs were about to pop out,” Big Miss Niu said.

“And then what happened?”

“And then his butts plopped onto a chair, his forehead was sweating, his eyes stared blankly, and he stayed like that for half a day before he finally stood up and walked back. His mouth was moving as if he was muttering to himself. He looked like a Taoist priest who was chanting a magic spell; nobody knew what he was saying.”

“You did not hear it?”

"I did not."

"And you did not find out who that little old granny was?"

"You'll never know." Big Miss Niu said, "I can guarantee that even if Zhuge Liang came back to life, he would never guess who that little old granny was."

She said, "When Sikong Zhaixing returned to our table that day, his expression looked like he had seen a big head ghost in a bright daylight, a big head ghost whose head is bigger than a lower millstone."

(Two)

When Big Miss Niu saw Sikong Zhaixing's expression as he walked back, she could not help asking, "Did you just see a big head ghost?"

"No." Sikong Zhaixing said, "Too bad I did not, too bad there is no big head ghost in here."

"Too bad? What do you mean 'too bad'?"

"Too bad means too bad. I would rather see a big head ghost just now."

Big Miss Niu lowered her voice, "Are you saying that that little old granny is more terrifying than a big head ghost?"

"Humph."

"Who is she?"

"Humph."

"What do you mean 'humph'?"

"Humph means, even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you." Sikong Zhaixing said, "Much less I simply do not know."

"You are lying," Big Miss Niu said, "This time I can see it clearly, you are lying."

This time Sikong Zhaixing did not even 'humph'.

Big Miss Niu sighed dramatically, "I can't believe the world-famous Sikong Zhaixing, the thief king of kings is actually this kind of person; not only he is a liar, he is a coward as well. Others only said a few words on his ear, and he is scared like a turtle grandson, and does not even dare to release a fart."

Suddenly Sikong Zhaixing stood up; he grinned at her direction and said, "Goodbye."

Before he even finished saying these two words [zai jian], his shadow has already disappeared.

Big Miss Niu was taken aback; she just sat there, seething with anger. Yet after staring blankly for half a day, she could not think of anything else.

When Sikong Zhaixing wanted to leave, who could think of anything to stop him? Who could catch up with him? Even if Big Miss Niu's magical power was more extensive, she could only look helplessly.

She was really angry. That thief, the little thief, has promised to accompany her to the town of Huangshi, yet now he avoided the problem by walking away.

But what's the use of getting angry? Other than being pissed off at herself, whom else could she get angry at?

To her surprise, that mysterious couple was still sitting on the same table, talking with each other in low voices, but it was unclear what they were talking about; sometimes they even sneaked a glance or two at her direction and smiled.

Finally Big Miss Niu could not take it anymore; like a spring she suddenly sprang up off the chair and walked to the corner in big strides.

When she arrived, Big Miss Niu was getting angrier.

Unexpectedly the amount of food this yellow faced little old man with emaciated body and the hunched-back little old granny ate was more than two horses could eat.

More irritating was that horses eat grass, this couple did not eat grass, neither did they eat 'plain' food.

All they were eating was food that healthy people, people with good appetite, would eat.

Coincidentally, our Big Miss Niu was a healthy person with good appetite, plus she was very hungry.

More irritating still, not only these two old turtles did not invite her to sit down, they did not even show any sign that they were going to invite her to eat.

Therefore, Big Miss Niu made a 'resolution'; her mind was made up. And when this Big Miss was determined, she would do anything.

Suddenly she sat down; she sat down on the chair that Sikong Zhaixing was sitting a moment ago. Picking up a pair of chopsticks, she started to eat. She ate all the good stuff, without being shy at all.

The hunched-back little old granny looked at her in shock. She looked at her for half a day, and could not help but sighing, "Time has really changed. When I was a young girl, it was not like this."

"What was it like when you were young?" Big Miss Niu's chopsticks did not even slow down.

"In those days, even if people invited us to eat a bit of food, we still did not dare to move our chopsticks."

"In those days, you really did not move your chopsticks?" Big Miss Niu leaned over the table and giggled incessantly, she even forgot to eat the big piece of roast duck in green onion that was held between her chopsticks.

Suddenly she felt that these two old turtles were not as annoying as she thought they were just a moment ago.

Who would have thought that the little old granny did something that she could not stand.

Unexpectedly she grabbed her hand and with eyes full of sympathy she looked at her and said in a very tender voice, "Little Miss, you must cheer up a bit, don't let the grief overcome you."

"I am grieving?" Big Miss Niu seemed very surprised; in a very puzzled tone she said, "Who said I am grieving? I am not grieving at all!"

The little old granny seemed to be more surprised, more puzzled, "You are not grieving? You really are not grieving at all?"

"Why would I want to grieve?" Big Miss Niu said, "Lao Taitai [Madame, a term of respect toward an elderly lady], could it be that you cannot see that I am a very cheerful person?"

The old lady just sighed; she did not say anything.

Big Miss Niu did not say anything either; she was about to resume eating, but all of a sudden she did not feel like eating anymore.

There was something in these mysterious little old man and little old granny that made her lose her appetite.

This 'something' was obviously a feeling, some kind of very, very strange feeling. We can even describe it as – an extremely strange feeling.

Therefore, finally Miss Niu put down her chopsticks.

"Lao Taitai," she said, "Didn't you just console me not to be overcome with grief?"

"Ay!" The old lady did not speak, she just sighed.

"In that case, Lao Taitai, may I ask, do I have any reason to be overcome with grief?"

"Ay, I don't know." The old lady said, "Time has indeed changed, I don't know any more if this kind of matter should make people feel overcome with grief or not."

She sighed before continuing, "I only know that when I was a young girl, if I came across this kind of matter, not only I would be overcome with grief, I could have cried secretly for more than ten days to half a month."

Big Miss Niu began to feel anxious. "Lao Taitai, what has actually happened?"

The old lady did not reply; she asked her a question instead, "Do you know that Ximen Chuixue has gone to Huangshi?"

"I just heard about that."

"Do you know why he went there?"

"He went to look for Lu Xiaofeng." Big Miss Niu said, "Because, after all, he still considers Lu Xiaofeng his friend."

"You are wrong." The old lady said, "He did not look for Lu Xiaofeng; because no one in this world will be able to find Lu Xiaofeng."

"Why?" Big Miss Niu was becoming more and more anxious, "Why?"

"Because a living, breathing person will never find a dead person." The old lady said, "If a living person wanted to find a dead person, he must die first."

She said, "Ximen Chuixue did not want to die, he went there to avenge Lu Xiaofeng."

-- Lu Xiaofeng had died in Huangshi, no doubt this news has spread like a wild fire in Jianghu.

These old gentleman and old lady did not seem like they were lying, otherwise, how could they scare Beef Soup away?

Big Miss Niu did not remember how she went down the restaurant, much less how she reacted after hearing the news.

She only knew that right now she was already sitting underneath a branch of a big tree, and that she had been crying that she looked like a crying figurine.

These days and those days are just the same, whether it is now or in the past, a normal girl with normal emotion would grieve over a man whom she likes.

In one aspect, Big Miss Niu's actions may not be considered too normal, but her feeling was definitely not less than any other girl.

The tears that she shed were definitely not less than anyone's.

(Three)

The yellow sandy soil on the plateau was blown by the wind, just like before.

The town of Huangshi seemed to be a place the time has forgotten, or perhaps the people in Huangshi Town deliberately forgot about the time.

Whether they were forgotten by time or they had forgotten the time, both cases had one thing in common.

-- Nothing was changed.

The town of Huangshi has not changed the least bit.

When Ximen Chuixue walked into Huangshi, just like Lu Xiaofeng, the first thing he saw was a very poor street, and an extremely poor man.

This poor man, so poor that he was about to die, was naturally the one who professed to be Beggar Clan's twenty-third generation disciple Huang Xiaochong.

When Huang Xiaochong saw Ximen Chuixue, unexpectedly his eyes also lit up, just like when he saw Lu Xiaofeng.

Too bad Ximen Chuixue was not Lu Xiaofeng.

Lu Xiaofeng might ask him where the inn was, but Ximen Chuixue only stared at him with cold eyes.

Cold eyes like a pair of sharp arrows penetrating the bottom of Huang Xiaochong's heart.

Huang Xiaochong cowered as he asked, "Are you looking for an inn?"

Ximen Chuixue did not reply. However, sometimes silence is also a kind of answer. At the very least, in Huang Xiaochong's eyes, who was used to interpret others' intention by looking at their expression, Ximen Chuixue's silence was a kind of answer.

The small wooden shed behind the 'Big Eye Grocery Store' has not changed either. There was still a wooden bed, and on the wooden bed there was a white bed sheet. The only difference was that the white bed sheet was brand new, bright and beautiful, and clean. As clean as Ximen Chuixue's clothes.

Huang Xiaochong's eyes were looking at Ximen Chuixue's eyes. Ximen Chuixue's eyes were fixed on the red paper pasted above the headboard of the bed. It was the red paper listing the food and lodging cost.

Huang Xiaochong tried to read Ximen Chuixue's expression, but Ximen Chuixue's expression was as cold as a thousand-year frozen ice. It was cold and hard; it was impenetrable even with a sword, much less a pair of human eyes.

Therefore, Huang Xiaochong had no choice but to put on a smiling face as he said, "This is the only place to stay in Huangshi, will it be to Gongzi's satisfaction?"

"Of course it is. In here, other than food and lodging, all your needs will be served well; how can it not be to Gongzi's satisfaction?"

Naturally the one answering was not Ximen Chuixue, because the voice was clear and crisp; obviously it was a woman's voice.

Following the reply, the lady boss of 'Big Eye Grocery Store' walked in with swayed hips.

With a coquettish smile on her face and exaggerated sway of her entire body, she walked straight toward Ximen Chuixue and said, "Gongzi ..."

Not only the lady boss was not able to continue, the smile also completely disappeared from her face.

When snow encounters the warmth of the sun, naturally the snow will melt; however, a block of ice that has been frozen for thousands of years will not melt. Not only it will not melt, on the contrary, it will turn the sunshine cold, it will eclipse the warmth of the sun.

Ximen Chuixue's cold expression was enough to overwhelm the lady boss; he did not even cast a single glance toward the lady boss, he simply turned around and walked away. Then how could the lady boss continue whatever it was that she wanted to say? How could her smiling expression not disappear?

"Gongzi ... Gongzi ..." Huang Xiaochong followed behind Ximen Chuixue; he kept on calling.

Like a deaf man Ximen Chuixue kept walking, straight toward the grocery store's front door, and out to the street.

To Huang Xiaochong, it was also a kind of answer.

Huang Xiaochong was very disappointed. He could only look at Wang

Dayan and the lady boss with helpless expression; his mouth really wanted to rain curses on Ximen Chuixue.

His mouth opened, but he was dumbstruck; his two eyes grew big as he stared at the door.

Wang Dayan and the lady boss also could not help staring at the door.

-- Ximen Chuixue.

Ximen Chuixue, who had just walked out the door, suddenly turned around and strode back in.

The lady boss' face immediately bloomed like spring flowers.

Too bad Ximen Chuixue was Ximen Chuixue; he did not cast a single glance toward her. His eyes were fixed, not on anybody, but on something.

His hands were reaching toward the thing he kept his eyes on.

It was a folded fire paper and a stick of fireworks.

With his left hand he picked up the fire paper and the fireworks, while his right hand flicked a yuanbao [silver or gold boat-shaped ingot] onto the sales counter.

Naturally Ximen Chuixue's action attracted lady boss and the others' curiosity. They could not stop themselves from following him out the door.

Why did Ximen Chuixue buy fire paper and fireworks?

Very soon they had the answer to this question.

Because as soon as Ximen Chuixue's foot stepped on the sandy street of Huangshi, the fireworks in his hand immediately 'whoosh!' flew to the sky above the town of Huangshi.

The fireworks burst out in the sky and in an instant producing bright sparks, which were then blown by the wind and disappeared to who knows where.

However, Ximen Chuixue's whereabouts was known by lady boss and the others, because he did not leave town at all.

Not only he did not leave Huangshi, he even sat down on a rock in the street. He sat still, like an old monk meditating, but also resembled a block of cold ice that never saw sunlight all year long.

The sun had disappeared; the western horizon was adorned with a strip of red clouds. The red glow was reflected upon Ximen Chuixue's white clothes, so that he also appeared to be shrouded in red glow.

The wind was blowing stronger. But the sound of whistling wind still could not hide the sound of galloping horses.

Following the sound of horses' hooves, twenty-four riders appeared on the yellow sandy road outside the town of Huangshi.

The speeding horses galloped fast, but they also stopped fast.

When they were about twenty zhang outside Huangshi town's limit, all twenty-four horses stopped together.

Maintaining their silence the riders jumped down. Twenty-four horses formed a rectangle.

-- Who were these people? Why did they come here?

These questions floated in lady boss and the others' mind at this moment.

Those twenty-four men, who had just jumped down from their horses, very skilfully and in rapid action carried out their work. From the degree of their proficiency, it seemed like these men had been doing this kind of work since they were little.

Therefore, in less than the time needed to drink a cup of tea, the question in lady boss' mind already had its answer.

And the answer was not complicated.

-- They came here to build a tent.

The canvass of the tent was as white as snow, it was whiter than the clothes on Ximen Chuixue's body, because Ximen Chuixue's clothes had been blown by the blowing sand of Huangshi for several sichen.

The tent was set up, another set of hoof beat was heard.

But this time the hoof beat was only the clippity-clop of one horse.

As soon as the tent was set up, those twenty-four men, still maintaining their silence, jumped back onto their horses and galloped away.

Behind the dust kicked by these twenty-four horses, a carriage approached slowly. The person driving the carriage was wearing the exact same clothes as the men setting up the tent, *i.e.* simple black uniform.

The carriage stopped in front of the tent. Immediately four men, also wearing simple black uniforms, jumped down from the back of the carriage. These four men jumped and landed on the ground in unison, because their bodies were connected by a pair of shoulder poles.

On the shoulder poles was a large barrel, and the mouth of the barrel emitted hot white steam.

They carried the large barrel into the tent.

When the four men re-emerged from the tent, they still had the

shoulder poles in their hands. They did not say anything either as they re-entered the carriage. The driver immediately pulled the reins, the horse turned around and quietly slipped away, returning to the direction it came from.

Just then, a strange phenomenon happened.

Clearly it was only one carriage left, but suddenly it sounded like there were two carriages going away.

"What magic trick are they playing?" The little beggar Huang Xiaochong could not help voicing the question in their minds.

"Are you asking me?" The lady boss looked at the little beggar and said, "Then whom should I ask?"

The lady boss did not need to ask anybody, because she already saw two carriages crossing each other.

The so-called strange phenomenon was actually another carriage rushing toward Huangshi Town.

The incoming carriage's driver wore the same uniform as the departing carriage's driver. Apparently they were of the same group of people.

The incoming carriage also halted at the exact same spot as the departing carriage.

"What do you think is coming this time?" the little beggar looked at the lady boss and asked. His expression looked as if he already knew what was inside the carriage.

"Do you think it's another barrel? Do you think they are going to do some fortune-telling [orig. 'looking at a thousand li'] or trying to resurrect Zhuge Liang?" the lady boss said.

"How did you know that I'd guess there is another wooden barrel inside?" the little beggar asked.

"Because I am as stupid as you are," the lady boss said.

There was a reason why the lady boss said that she was stupid, because she already saw who were getting down from the carriage. Not men in black, but people in white. Not big, burly men, but elegant, dainty young girls.

Four young girls, two held a torch in each hand, one carried a set of pure white clothing in her hands, the last one held a big bath towel with both hands.

Four young girls went into the tent, and the carriage immediately departed.

Very soon the tent lit up.

-- No matter which tent, if there were four torches inside, it will be bright inside; much less a spotlessly white, almost translucent tent?

"I know what those people are doing in here," the little beggar was very pleased with himself.

"You do? You really know?" the lady boss asked.

"I do, I really know."

"What are they doing here?"

"They came here to deliver the bath water."

The lady boss raised her hand to smack the little beggar's head, but her hand did not hit the little beggar's head, not because the little beggar dodged her, but because the lady boss suddenly realized something.

She realized that the little beggar was not joking. These people were indeed delivering water for bath. Thereupon with eyes wide open, with jaw dropped, she said, "He is really Ximen Chuixue?"

"No kidding! Other than Ximen Chuixue, is there anyone else who enters Huangshi Town without saying anything?" the Little Beggar said.

"Right. Other than Ximen Chuixue, who else so loves cleanliness that he can't stand staying at Huangshi's only luxurious hotel – my grocery store?" For a moment the grocery store's lady boss seemed to have become wiser.

"Coming to Huangshi Town, blown by yellow sand for a day, other than Ximen Chuixue, who would think of taking a bath and change clothes?" The little beggar's expression became even more proud of himself.

Lady boss suddenly frowned.

"What's wrong with you?" the little beggar asked.

"What's wrong? Didn't you see how many people Ximen Chuixue brought to Huangshi?"

The little beggar laughed; he said, "Don't worry, if Ximen Chuixue rely on numbers to score victory, long ago he has ceased to become Ximen Chuixue. The reason Ximen Chuixue is Ximen Chuixue, is precisely because he always acts alone."

"But those men in black, how do you explain that?"

"They are his servants; that's all. In this aspect, Ximen Chuixue's behavior is like a young master of a rich and powerful family, not like a swordsman."

Thereupon, the lady boss' eyebrows leveled down again.

Those men in black were delivering bath water for Ximen Chuixue, because as soon as everything was ready, Ximen Chuixue stood up from the rock where he had been sitting, and walked toward the tent.

"Let's go." When the grocery store boss saw Ximen Chuixue entered the tent, he turned around toward the shop.

"Go? If you want to go you may leave first," the lady boss said.

"Why? Don't tell me you want to watch Ximen Chuixue taking a bath," the little beggar's eyes grew big.

"You are really smart," the lady boss said with a sweet laughter, "One guess and you nailed it."

"Is someone taking a bath good to watch?" the grocery store boss asked.

"Other people taking a bath are not good to watch, but the swordsman of this age, Ximen Chuixue taking a bath, it is a good show, one in a million chance."

The grocery store boss knitted his eyebrows; he turned around and walked away.

"Wait!" the little beggar suddenly called out.

"What? Do you also want to watch Ximen Chuixue taking a bath?"

"Shhh! Listen," the little beggar said.

Hoof beats. One horse's hoof beats.

The grocery store boss looked at the little beggar, the little beggar looked at the lady boss, the lady boss looked at the grocery store boss.

No wonder they looked at each other in bewilderment; the tent was set up, the bath water was delivered, the change of clothes were ready, four women to help him taking a bath have all arrived, what was this horse doing?

Very soon they saw the horse, and then the rider as well.

The rider this time was not a big man wearing black, instead it was a woman wearing floral cloth.

The woman galloped the horse straight toward the tent, and then she flew down from the horse, and rushed into the tent.

But just as quick she came back out. However, when she was outside, she did not mount her horse, instead, she led the horse in the direction of the lady boss.

"You have business tonight," the little beggar said to the grocery store boss.

"What business?"

"The broken down room behind your store, someone is going to stay

there tonight.”

“How do you know?”

“Didn’t you see the woman went in and went back out right away? She must be thinking of spending the night with Ximen Chuixue in the tent, but she was kicked out. Ximen Chuixue must have recommended the Huangshi Town’s one and only luxurious hotel – your grocery store.”

“Since you saw Ximen Chuixue, how many sentences did he say to you altogether?” the grocery store boss asked.

“Not even one.”

“Then you’d think Ximen Chuixue would want to waste his breath and recommend my luxurious hotel to this woman?”

The little beggar scratched his head. “It doesn’t matter if he did not recommend anything, in any case, your place is the only place in Huangshi where she can spend the night. If she is thinking of staying, you will have this business.”

The grocery store boss did not answer him, because the woman was already near.

“Are you looking for a place to stay?” At the sight of this good-looking woman, the little beggar’s eyes lit up.

"Yes, I am looking for a place to stay, but that is a secondary matter."

"I know what your first priority is," the smile on little beggar's face grew even brighter.

"You really know?"

"Of course. Those who seek lodging are usually people who have travelled a long way, so they must be hungry. Their first priority must be to find something to eat. So your first priority must also be looking for a place to eat. Isn't that right?"

"Wrong."

"Oh?"

"First, even if I want to find something to eat, I will only eat food that I personally prepare. Second, before I came here, I already ate till I was full."

"Then you ..."

"I'm here to convey a message."

"A message? What message?"

"Ximen Chuixue's message."

"..." the little beggar was speechless, his jaw dropped.

"He wants you to give us what message?" the lady boss opened her mouth.

"When I entered the tent a moment ago, do you know what he said?"

"What?" the little beggar asked.

"He said, 'Go away.'"

"And thus you came here? He did not tell you to convey any message at all!" the little beggar said.

"He did."

"He did? I don't get it." The little beggar scratched his head.

"You will understand soon. Because when he said 'Go away', he did not tell me to go away, but he wants you to go away."

"How do you know he did not tell you to go away? How can he tell us to go away? You were the one who entered his tent!"

"Correct. However, entering the tent was not a crime; watching people taking a bath is." The woman looked at the lady boss and said, "He

wanted me to pass on a message, although it was only 'go away' two words, the meaning of these two words is that he wanted me to tell you to go away, don't peek a man taking a bath."

"What are you to him?" the lady boss said, "Are you the worm inside his belly? Otherwise, how do you know what he meant?"

"Of course I know what he meant."

"Why?"

"Because I am his friend. Ximen Chuixue has never told his friend to go away."

The lady boss did not say anything, the little beggar and the grocery store boss did not say anything either.

After looking at the red paper pasted on the wall of the little wooden shed behind the grocery store, the woman said to the lady boss, "I decided to stay. Do I need to pay first?"

"Of course," the little beggar said.

"I didn't ask you. Who's the boss here, anyway?"

The little beggar was speechless.

After receiving fifty qian, the lady boss winked at the little beggar, then turned around and walked out the door.

"Hold on," the woman said.

"What now? Could it be that you still want to convey Ximen Chuixue's message?" the little beggar said.

"Strange. How did you know?"

-- Did she really have a message from Ximen Chuixue?

The little beggar could not help scratching his head again. "Didn't you say that you entered the tent, he only said to you two words, 'go away'?"

"That's right. But these two words carried a number of meanings; do you know?"

"How was I to know? I just find out that you are unreasonable to the limit."

"And you found out only now? Do you know my name? My name is Beef Soup; the name itself is unreasonable enough."

The little beggar was dumbfounded.

"Listen up, Ximen Chuixue said, you, town people, tomorrow from the

sun up 'till it shines on your butt, one by one you must come to his tent, he has a question to ask you."

"Who does he think he is? The Emperor [huang di]?" the little beggar said.

"That's right, right now he is the Huangshi Town's local tyrant [tu huang di]," Beef Soup said.

"If we don't come?" the lady boss said.

"Don't come? Don't come is alright, but, if you don't come, I am afraid later on you won't be able to walk anymore."

"Why?"

"Can someone who has no legs walk?"

(Four)

Sunshine, it made the flying sandy dust even more prominent. Sunshine, it also illuminated the white tent outside Huangshi Town even more radiant and stood out.

The front part of the tent was wide open, revealing a table inside the tent, and on either side of the table sat two people.

One was Ximen Chuixue with his grave and stern expression, the other was Beef Soup with cheery, lovely smile on her face.

On the table there were dishes, dishes of delicacies. On the table there was also wine, strong wine.

Beef Soup pointed to a lone figure walking out from Huangshi Town, "They are here! They are here!"

Ximen Chuixue's expression was still as cold as ever.

Beef Soup seemed to be totally at ease with the cold expression, still with her silver-bell like cheery voice she said, "Last night I took the initiative to have all Huangshi Town people to come here one by one. Just look, the first one is here."

Ximen Chuixue still did not open his mouth. The only movement he made was picking up the wine cup and slowly sipping the wine inside.

"When they are here, I will act on your behalf to question them, to ask them about Lu Xiaofeng's whereabouts. What do you think?"

Still he did not open his mouth.

"But let me make it clear first: everything I say will be your idea. If anything is wrong and they want to fight, uh, this fight, it must be you who deal with it."

Ximen Chuixue still did not speak; he still fixed his gaze on the person approaching the tent with the same cold eyes.

"Who's coming?" Beef Soup asked.

The man looked at Ximen Chuixue. When his eyes made contact with those as-sharp-as-arrow cold eyes, he promptly averted his gaze to look at Beef Soup instead.

"I am surnamed Zhao, I am called Zhao Xiazi." [Reminder: 'xia zi' means 'blind guy'.]

"Your eyes are not blind, why are you called Zhao Xiazi?"

"This calling has no reason, just like Miss. You are not smelly like a cow, and you are not dripping wet like a bowl of beef soup, why are you called Beef Soup?"

"Whoa, your mouth is so formidable, I won't argue with you. Right now I want to ask you, listen to me clearly, my question is not my own, but I am doing this on Ximen Chuixue Daxia's behalf, you must answer it honestly. Otherwise, humph, humph, if your eyes match your calling, it won't be too much fun."

"What does Miss wish to know?"

"It's not me who wanted to know, it's this Ximen Daxia who wanted to know."

"Yes."

"Alright, let me ask you, have you seen Lu Xiaofeng?"

"I have."

"Where?"

"Here, in Huangshi Town."

"Alright, where is he now?"

"Dead."

"Dead?" Beef Soup's eyes widened, her mouth was also wide open.

Yet Ximen Chuixue did not show any emotion.

"You are not lying to me?" Beef Soup's voice trembled a little.

"If you don't believe me, you can ask the next person."

"Of course I don't believe you." Beef Soup said, "Who would believe Lu Xiaofeng could die? Do you believe him?" Beef Soup looked at Ximen Chuixue, with a slightly trembling voice she asked again, "Do you believe

him?"

Ximen Chuixue did not answer, his eyes were fixed on another person coming out of Huangshi Town.

It was the little beggar.

Next to him was the grocery store boss, followed by the lady boss.

They all said the same thing: "Lu Xiaofeng is dead."

Did Beef Soup finally believe?

"I don't believe it. There is one more person; if he also says that Lu Xiaofeng is dead, perhaps I will believe."

"Who?" the lady boss asked before she left.

"Sha Dahu."

Sha Dahu did not come. He only sent a servant who worked at his home. This servant brought an invitation that said that none outside the Great Wall did not admire Ximen Chuixue's great name, and he wanted to invite him to share an evening meal in his residence.

When Beef Soup finished reading what was written on the invitation, she was both angered and anxious. Suddenly she took out three

hourglasses from her pocket.

Placing the three hourglasses on the table, she said to the servant, "Do you see these three hourglasses?"

The servant nodded.

"When I turn the first one upside down, the sand will immediately flow to the bottom. By the time the sand drains out, you will already reach Sha Dahu's place. Do you understand?"

The servant nodded.

"The second one, I will turn upside down when the first one is finished. When the sand is drained out, that will be the time Sha Dahu arrives here. Do you understand?"

The servant nodded.

"Now the third one. If Sha Dahu is here, then I won't use it. If he does not come, before the sand is emptied, Sha Dahu's head will be gone. Do you believe it?"

"I believe, I believe."

"Then you'd better go back immediately, I am turning the first hourglass upside down right now."

The servant was so scared that his face was deathly pale; he ran away like a dog.

(Five)

Very soon all the sand in the first hourglass dropped to the bottom. Beef Soup looked at Ximen Chuixue, she said, "That servant should have arrived by now, right?"

Ximen Chuixue did not speak, he did not even cast a single glance toward the hourglass.

But Beef Soup already turned the second hourglass upside down. Unexpectedly the hand that was holding the hourglass trembled a little.

Was she afraid that Sha Dahu was not coming? Or was she afraid Sha Dahu would also declare that Lu Xiaofeng was dead?

Whether she was afraid or not, what was about to come will eventually come.

Fear. It was just like the sand in the hourglass, bit by bit it accumulated and gradually began to take shape.

The sand in the second hourglass too would flow to the bottom.

From the distance, the figure of Sha Dahu was traveling in haste.

Beef Soup's entire body trembled slightly, again.

Unexpectedly, this time Ximen Chuixue caught that Beef Soup was trembling; for the first time he opened his mouth, "Calm down!"

These two words were cold, but they had the desired warming effect; Beef Soup stopped trembling.

Beef Soup indeed calmed down. Her voice was calm when she spoke to Sha Dahu, who was coming near, "You must be Sha Dahu?"

"That's right, all the town people call me Sha Dahu."

"That's right, you do look a lot like a man from a 'dahu' [rich family]."
[See Chapter 3 and 4 for explanation on Sha Dahu's name.]

"Miss Niu praised me too much."

"I did not praise you, to be a man from a rich family you must have a clear view of things; people who cannot adapt to current circumstances, can they become a 'dahu' in other places?"

Sha Dahu laughed; he just laughed blindly.

Beef Soup added, "However, whether you can continue being a 'dahu' in the future, it remain to be seen!"

"Oh? Why?"

"Because we need to see if right now you have a clear view of things or not."

"If I do not have a clear view of things, would I stand right here right now?"

"That's good. Now I am representing Ximen Daxia here to ask you a question, you must answer me honestly."

"What question? Is it the same question you have been asking the other town people?"

"Since you already know, why don't you answer directly?"

"How am I supposed to respond?" Sha Dahu asked.

"Give me an honest answer, and that is good enough."

"Honest answer? You don't believe an honest answer anyway!"

Beef Soup's countenance changed dramatically, it became deathly pale, she tried to open her mouth, but nothing came out.

A drop of tear started to appear at the corner of her eyes, it grew

bigger and bigger, finally it slowly rolled down her cheek.

When she opened her mouth again, her voice broke, "You mean, he ... he is already ... already dead?"

Sha Dahu's voice suddenly sounded very cold. "That's right, he is already dead!"

Beef Soup was unable to speak; she covered her face with both hands.

Ximen Chuixue spoke another short sentence, "Do you have any proof?"

"I do."

(Six)

Of course the best proof was Lu Xiaofeng's body.

And if they wanted to see Lu Xiaofeng's body, naturally they had to go to the coffin shop.

Sha Dahu told them that.

For most people, when they die, their bodies will be buried in the grave, but why was it that if they wanted to see Lu Xiaofeng's body they had to go to the coffin shop?

Because nobody came to collect the body; people of Huangshi Town would not bury him.

It was also what Sha Dahu had told them.

By the time Sha Dahu finished speaking, they have arrived at the coffin shop, as if he had already calculated everything he wanted to say, not a single word more, not a single word less; he talked right until they reached the coffin shop's front door.

Zhao Xiazi seemed to know that they were coming. He humphed and said, "When I said it, you did not believe, Sha Dahu said it, you believed. Ay! This is called 'the truth still relies on power and influence'!"

What he said was very reasonable, too bad it was like an empty word, because the others did not even seem to realize that he existed. They simply strode over and entered the coffin shop.

This time Beef Soup was crying openly. Not only did she cry, she was practically bawling. But when she saw the coffin and the memorial tablet in front of the coffin, how could she not be grieved?

Even Ximen Chuixue's always grave and stern expression appeared to change slightly.

Because the words written on the memorial tablet was 'deceased friend Lu Xiaofeng'.

Ximen Chuixue opened his mouth again. The words he said are always

short and simple. He only said two words, "Open up."

"I knew that there would be people who want to see him," Zhao Xiazi said, "Hence I never nailed the coffin shut."

"Open up." Ximen Chuixue was still saying those two words.

Zhao Xiazi cast a glance toward Sha Dahu; the two of them quickly lifted the coffin lid and put it down on the floor.

Beef Soup was crying even louder.

Zhao Xiazi suddenly looked at Beef Soup and said, "You are crying blindly; do you know for sure that the one lying in the coffin is the one you mentioned, the Lu Xiaofeng?"

Beef Soup stopped crying. Her eyes grew big as she stared at Zhao Xiazi for a long time, before she finally walked slowly toward the side of the coffin.

Beef Soup looked carefully at the man in the coffin; she looked at his face, she also looked at the fatal wound on his chest.

And then, she suddenly laughed.

Throwing her head back, she laughed loudly; pointing her finger to Zhao Xiazi, she said, "You are really funny; you went so far as to say that he is not Lu Xiaofeng ..."

Her laughter suddenly turned into very sad wailing.

Ximen Chuixue stared at Lu Xiaofeng's body for a long time, but the expression on his face did not change at all.

He kept staring until Beef Soup wailing became crying, and then from crying it turned into sobs. Only then did he speak, and what he said was still two words, "Close up."

By the time the coffin lid had been returned to its original place, Beef Soup had stopped crying.

Suddenly Ximen Chuixue said two more words, "Get down."

When Ximen Chuixue spoke those two words, he did not lift up his head at all. The ones who looked up were Beef Soup, Sha Dahu and Zhao Xiazhi.

As soon as they looked up, they saw someone hanging under the eaves, with his face looking in through the window. This face soon became a figure, which, using some kind of continuous crawling technique, rolled down along the wall.

"Little beggar!" Zhao Xiazhi opened his mouth, "What are you doing hiding outside the window? Trying to steal my coffin?"

"Shut your crow's beak up! Why would I want to steal a coffin? If I want

to steal, it won't be from you."

"So, what are you doing?"

"Nothing. I came here to deliver an invitation."

"Deliver an invitation? For who?"

"Not you, for sure. With your freakish appearance, who would want to send you any invitation? It's for this Ximen Daxia."

The content of the invitation was very simple; it only had thirty-five characters:

Heard Daxia has come from afar, cannot help admiring, although your maidservant has been exiled to the other end of the world, I simply have to seize the opportunity to pay my respect. Tomorrow at wu hour [between 11am – 1pm], only using coarse tea, to wash the dust from my lord. [Translator's note: trust me, the original Chinese does have 35 characters.]

Based only on these 35 characters, how could Ximen Chuixue agree to keep the appointment?

Of course not. He came to look for Lu Xiaofeng. Lu Xiaofeng was dead, he must investigate the cause of Lu Xiaofeng's death, how could he have the mood to enjoy coarse tea?

However, he must go. Because, on the margin of the invitation, there was another line of characters.

P.S. Lu Daxia's cause of death, your maidservant has slight knowledge of it.

Chapter 18 – Feast without good feast

(One)

If anybody ever questioned who was the person in Jianghu who did not understand courtesy the most, the answer would be very simple.

-- Ximen Chuixue.

A man who never talked too much, naturally would not engage in senseless chit-chat.

Therefore, technically speaking, as long as one understood Ximen Chuixue's character, one could not possibly say that he did not understand courtesy.

Therefore, in Jianghu, the next person in the list considered as did not understand courtesy would be:

-- Beef Soup.

Not only she did not understand courtesy, she did not even speak in courteous manner.

Because as soon as she saw Gong Susu, she immediately asked in a threatening manner, "Do you know the cause of Lu Xiaofeng's death?"

If anybody ever questioned who was the person in Jianghu with the best self-cultivation, then perhaps Gong Susu must be counted.

Because as Gong Susu heard Beef Soup's question, not only she was not angry, her countenance did not change the least bit either. Just like before, she maintained her cool, elegant, magnificent, and noble expression.

She merely heaved a deep sigh and said, "Such a good person, why must he die so early?"

"Who killed him?" Beef Soup pressed on.

Gong Susu heaved a deep sigh again and said, "Lu Xiaofeng was the person I admire the most, unexpectedly he died in Huangshi Town; I am extremely grieved."

"Speaking about grieving, I should be the one who grieve the most," Beef Soup said.

"Why?"

"Don't you know my relationship with him?" Beef Soup asked, "Tell me quickly, who killed him? I must avenge him."

"Who killed him? Who was capable of killing Lu Xiaofeng? The person who can kill him was naturally the person closest to him, the one he did not guard against the most."

"Who?"

"You'll find out soon enough. I already sent people to find them. Before they arrive, why don't we drink two cups, to toast Lu Daxia's spirit in heaven?"

Gong Susu heaved a deep sigh again. She picked up her cup and drained it in one gulp.

Beef Soup also picked up her cup and drained it in one gulp.

Even Ximen Chuixue, who was rarely seen moving too fast, also drank his wine in one gulp. Finished drinking, he removed the cup from his mouth and put it back on the table.

At this moment, his right hand was still holding the cup.

At this moment, the only movement he made was putting down the cup on the table.

At this moment, someone suddenly flew out of the muslin curtain behind him; someone whose hand wielded a sword. A woman.

The instant Ximen Chuixue was putting down a wine cup was the best instant to kill him. Because he had just finished his wine, his attention was not focused, plus he was putting down the cup, his right hand was relaxed, it did not move too fast.

Apparently this woman had calculated that her one strike would hit the target.

She was mistaken.

If Ximen Chuixue was that easy to be hit, long ago he was not Ximen Chuixue anymore, but a dead man.

Dead men can't move; Ximen Chuixue could.

Borrowing the force as he pressed the cup onto the table, Ximen Chuixue's body flew diagonally to the right.

When the woman's strike failed, she did not continue the attack; she just stood motionless in the middle of the room, facing Ximen Chuixue.

Still with cold expression Ximen Chuixue also stood motionless, as if he did not even see this woman.

Gong Susu sprang up, and shout in a loud voice, "Gong Ping, what do you think you are doing?"

"I heard that Ximen Gongzi's swordsmanship has been trained to 'without-sword' state. I want to experience it."

"Humph! I say you are tired of living!" Beef Soup said.

Gong Ping did not even cast a glance toward Beef Soup, her eyes were fixed on Ximen Chuixue. "Draw your sword."

"I really think that you are really tired of living," Beef Soup said, "How dare you tell Ximen Daxia to draw his sword. Do you know the consequences once he draws his sword?"

Just like before, Gong Ping still ignored her.

Yet Beef Soup was still talking, "Your death is decided."

With a cold laugh Gong Ping said, "There is always an exception to everything."

Finished speaking, she raised her sword and thrust it toward Ximen Chuixue. In one breath she attacked twenty-four strokes.

With unbelievable speed Ximen Chuixue changed the position of his body twenty-four times; and then there was a flash of sword.

Nobody saw how and when Ximen Chuixue drew his sword, and nobody saw how Ximen Chuixue's sword stabbed Gong Ping; what they saw was just a flash.

It was exactly in that flash that Gong Ping fell.

(Two)

When Gong Ping landed on the floor, she let out a cry, 'Huh!'

And right after the 'huh!' came Sha Dahu's laughter. "Good swordsmanship!" Sha Dahu walked in while clapping his hands.

"Ximen Chuixue's 'without-sword' state is indeed a fully justified reputation." Behind Sha Dahu, the lady boss, the grocery store boss and the little beggar Huang Xiaochong also walked in.

The grocery store boss looked at Ximen Chuixue and Beef Soup, and said, "Actually, I already knew the murderer long ago."

"Who is it?" Beef Soup asked.

The boss only laughed without replying; the one replying was the lady boss, "He practically does not have any idea who the murderer was."

"Why do you think that I did not know who the murderer was?"

"If you did, wouldn't you have said it sooner?"

"Say it sooner? If I said it sooner, do you think I can stay alive until now?"

The little beggar suddenly opened his mouth, "Aren't you afraid the murderer would kill you to close your mouth?"

"Kill me to close my mouth? Won't that mean he is revealing his own identity?"

"Actually, who is the murderer?" Beef Soup pressed again.

"It would be best if the murderer is actually a lot of people."

This sentence was coming from the door.

"Why?" the little beggar directed his question to Zhao Xiazi, who had just walked in.

"Why? If there are more killers, won't my coffin shop enjoy more business? Ha ha ha ha ..."

Ximen Chuixue's grave and solemn expression suddenly betrayed a very-difficult-to-detect sneer; not only did he open his mouth, the number of words he said could be considered a lot. He said, "The murderers are indeed many."

Such words, naturally those who heard it were shocked.

As a result, Beef Soup included, everybody seemed to be nailed on the spot with surprised look on their face; all eyes were fixed on Ximen Chuixue.

Beef Soup could not help asking, "Who are they?"

"He," Ximen Chuixue pointed to Sha Dahu.

"He," Ximen Chuixue pointed to the boss, and then to the lady boss, Zhao Xiazi, the little beggar, and repeatedly said four 'he' and 'she' words. [Translator's note: in Chinese, 'he' and 'she' are pronounced the same, 'ta', although the characters are not the same.]

"There's more." Ximen Chuixue suddenly spoke two more words.

"More?" Beef Soup's eyes widened.

"She," Ximen Chuixue pointed to Gong Susu.

Laughter suddenly filled the entire main hall of the house.

Naturally those who burst out laughing were not Ximen Chuixue and Beef Soup, but the murderers Ximen Chuixue pointed his finger at.

It was a very proud laughter. It has made Beef Soup very surprised, because she knew that based on these people's ability, Ximen Chuixue could easily put them under control, how could they still laugh? Could it be that it was because they were not the murderers?

Very soon she had the answer to her question.

Because Gong Susu suddenly stopped laughing and said, "Ximen Chuixue, you have guessed correctly. Everybody in Huangshi Town is Lu

Xiaofeng's killer."

"Too bad," the lady boss said, "You knew it too late."

"No, not late at all," Zhao Xiazi said.

"Why not?" the little beggar asked.

"Because he's just in time to sleep in my coffin."

The expression on their faces became very delighted again.

Yet the expression on Ximen Chuixue's face, which has never changed, suddenly changed. Not only did it change, cold sweats started to form on his forehead.

Noticing the change in Ximen Chuixue's expression, the expression on Beef Soup's face changed even greater. Her mouth was wide open, but no word came out.

Gong Susu looked at Beef Soup, very smugly she said, "You wanted to ask whether the wine was poisonous, didn't you?"

Beef Soup's eyes grew even bigger.

"Let me tell you then: there is poison in the wine." Gong Susu laughter became more smug.

The little beggar walked over to face Beef Soup; he reached out to pinch Beef Soup's cheek. With a giggle he said, "And now your vision is getting blurry, isn't it?"

The little beggar lightly patted Beef Soup's face twice, and said, "Are you still the proud little girl? Do you have any message from Ximen Daxia you want to tell us?"

Beef Soup struggled; she staggered toward Ximen Chuixue, but after only two steps, she collapsed. Her fingers happened to touch Ximen Chuixue's shoe.

Such a weak and powerless hand, such a weak and powerless touch, but just like 'four taels toppling a thousand jin' [1 tael is approx. 50g, 1 jin (or catty) is approx. 500g], it knocked Ximen Chuixue down.

Once again triumphant laughter filled the hall.

(Three)

In a busy wine shop on a bustling street, who would pay special attention to a couple of old people?

Although nobody paid any attention, although the little old man and the little old granny were sitting on a table in the corner, they still held their conversation in very low voices.

The little old man's eyebrows were knitted, he looked at the little old granny and said, "Are you going to Huangshi Town right now?"

"If not now, then when?"

"Naturally after we understand everything a bit more clearly."

"I am afraid it is going to be too late by then."

"What's going to be too late?"

"By the time this case is over, my little friend might have been killed."

"Ximen Chuixue might be killed?"

"Precisely."

"He can be killed? Can you tell a bit fresher joke?"

"Do you think it is funny?"

"Don't you think it is funny?"

"Not funny at all. Don't forget, Liu Rugang died in Huangshi Town, Lu Xiaofeng also died in Huangshi Town."

The little old man's brows wrinkled even deeper. Suddenly he stood up.

The little old granny grabbed his hand, saying, "What are you doing?"

"What am I doing? Go to Huangshi Town, of course."

Chapter 19 – The little old granny's mysterious smile

Among the escort agencies in thirteen provinces from north to south, if the Zongbiaotou [Head Escort] of Central Plains Escort Agency Baili Changqing stood up and said that his escort agency was no more than a small agency, that means, in the entire China, no escort agency could use the word 'big' to describe their own escort agency.

Which escort agency in thirteen provinces from north to south dared to claim to be number one? None. Because the Zongbiaotou of Central Plains Escort Agency Baili Changqing also said that the Central Plains Escort Agency was only number two.

How many branches did the Central Plains Escort Agency have within the thirteen provinces? Even Baili Changqing himself was not too clear. Too many branches, too resounding reputation. Practically, this fact has enabled Baili Changqing to raise birds [as pet] and grow flowers all day long, *i.e.* live in ease and comfort.

In fact, Baili Changqing had not escorted any goods for over seventeen years; even sizeable goods were handed over to his Vice-Head Escort Jin Peng to be escorted.

Over the last seventeen years, Baili Changqing has handed over all affairs, big and small, to be handled by Jin Peng. Jin Peng has become his right and left hands, and he had never made any mistake.

Therefore, when Jin Peng came to him to report that everything was in order, he ought to just nod and stroke his beard, and smile a cheerful relief.

But this time, he did not smile.

Not only he did not smile, he still asked with heavy concentration on his face, "Have the routes been surveyed well?"

"Absolutely safe," Jin Peng said, "For this escort, we have made preparation for almost a year. All security measures have been taken along the route. Zongbiaotou may set your heart at ease."

"For the last dozen of years, thanks to you, who have never made any mistake, I can set my heart at ease. But this escort really carries a huge responsibility."

"I know. Thirty-five million taels of gold, how many things that much money can accomplish? Even eighty generations cannot spend it all up."

"Right, hence there must be no mistake, not the tiniest bit, in this escort job. Let's not talk about you and me, I am afraid the entire agency will be destroyed. Moreover, this is something that might have our families executed unto the third generation."

"I know that. That was the reason the Capital has sent Liu Chengfeng, Liu Daxia more than seven months ago to start investigating our route and make preparations for us."

"Did Liu Chengfeng send any news from over there?"

"The message came every fifteen days," Jin Peng said, "And each time it only has two words."

"Which two words?"

"All is safe [安全 – an quan]."

Since all was safe, it was time to hit the road.

For this particular escort, the Zongbiaotou of Central Plains Escort Agency Baili Changqing personally set out to lead the troops.

(Two)

Beef Soup was really, really anxious. In all her life, she has never been as anxious as this time.

She would rather have someone come and killed her with one chop of a saber; it would have been better than being locked up in this big prison, waiting for the execution.

Because waiting will only lead to anxiety, and anxiety has always been difficult to bear, it does not matter who you are.

She really could not stand it. With all her might she beat on the four walls, she shouted at the top of her lungs.

Other than the echo inside the prison, the response she got was only a pair of eyes.

A pair of cold eyes.

And this pair of eyes may not necessarily look at her, it may well be only staring at the empty space in front of her.

Ximen Chuixue was such a person; he always seemed to be indifferent to everything around him. With despair in her eyes she stared at Ximen Chuixue's cold face. "Are they going to kill us?" she asked.

Ximen Chuixue did not even cast a single glance to her, as if the question was not worth answering.

"Are they going to kill us?" Beef Soup asked again; this time she grabbed and shook Ximen Chuixue's shoulder.

"They won't."

These two words did not seem to come from Ximen Chuixue's mouth; rather, it sounded like Beef Soup has shaken it out of Ximen Chuixue's belly, from his belly it rolled up to his oral cavity, and from his oral cavity it squeezed out through his teeth.

It was an emotionless reply, but it has given Beef Soup an infinite hope.

The despair suddenly disappeared from her eyes, a bright radiance

arose in its place.

"Really?" she said, "They are really not going to kill us?"

Ximen Chuixue neither shook nor nodded his head.

Yet Beef Soup was nearly dancing and gesticulating for joy. She said, "I know what you mean; you are saying that since they put knock-out drug and not deadly poison in the wine, that means they are not going to kill us, is that right?"

"No, no, not right," Beef Soup answered herself, "If they are not going to kill us, then why lock us up here?"

It was apparently a question worth pondering.

Why did they lock Beef Soup and Ximen Chuixue up and not just put them down with a blade?

They were already worthless.

Lu Xiaofeng was dead, they came here to avenge him; not killing them would only increase the risk without any benefit at all.

It was impossible for Beef Soup to find the answer to this question. No matter how she racked her brains, she simply could not find it.

Because the answer was inside the minds of that bunch of Huangshi Town murderers.

Ximen Chuixue seemed to be already aware of this fact; therefore, he might as well close his eyes.

"Why not kill Ximen Chuixue?"

This question was raised by Sha Dahu.

Apparently, even Sha Dahu did not know the answer.

"Right, why not kill Ximen Chuixue?"

This time the grocery store boss and the coffin shop boss asked the same question together.

It seemed like only one person knew the answer to this question. Because the eyes of those people asking the question were looking at that one person.

"The reason we did not kill him," Gong Susu stood up and said, "Is for his sword manual."

"Sword manual?" Sha Dahu said, "Why would we want to have his sword manual?"

"Don't you want to learn his unrivaled-throughout-the-world sword technique?"

"At first I wanted to, but now I don't."

"Why?"

"Because very soon we will become very rich and powerful; why would we want to learn any sword technique?"

"After you have the money, you don't want to train martial art anymore?" Gong Susu asked.

"You are correct. Do you know how much is our share?" Sha Dahu asked.

"I can't figure it out."

"I can't either, but I know that with our share, even our sons and grandsons to the eightieth generation won't spend it all in food and drink." Sha Dahu swept the others with his gaze, "With so much money, why don't we eat, drink and be merry properly? Why do we have to train any sword?"

The coffin shop boss, whose countenance was originally like a dead man's face, suddenly appeared flush from excitement; practically it was like he had changed into a different person, from a dead man to an emperor. With an extremely happy tone, he said, "That's right, we only care about spending our life in drinking and pleasure; why do we care about sword technique?"

"Besides," Sha Dahu said, "By leaving Ximen Chuixue alive, we increase the number of our threat by one."

"Don't you worry, even ghost cannot escape that big prison, much less a trivial Ximen Chuixue?" Gong Susu looked at everybody; she said, "All of you only want money, I'll take that sword manual for myself. Leave Ximen Chuixue to me."

"But ..." Sha Dahu seemed to hesitate.

"You are afraid he might fly out of my big prison? Don't worry, leave it to me."

"Why leave it to you alone? This matter should be our collective responsibility." With leaps and bounds the little beggar came in. As soon as he was in, he said these words.

"You know what we are talking about, right?" the lady boss said.

"And you know what I am talking about too, right?"

"What is it?"

"The thing that we agreed on, of course!"

"Are they here?"

The little beggar nodded; he said, "They are here."

They? Who was 'they'?

(Three)

The little old man seemed to be very familiar with the roads around Huangshi Town, he deliberately made seven turns and eight detours before reaching the outskirts of Huangshi, just when the sun was setting.

"You see, didn't I tell you so?" looking at the setting sun the little old man said, "I told you that we are going to arrive at Huangshi Town exactly at sun down; I didn't deceive you, did I?"

"Not on this point, you didn't. But you deceived me on another point," the little old granny said.

"Another point? How did I deceive you?"

"You deceived me to take half a day of pointless trip."

"No, I didn't," the little old man said, "I only told you that we should arrive at Huangshi Town right around sundown, and you said it should be around noon. I said you were wrong, and you said let's go and see, and so we just went. Isn't that right?"

"Right."

"So you see, isn't the sun going down the mountain?"

"Yes."

"Hence I was right, I did not deceive you, I did not cheat you to take half a day of pointless trip."

"Alright, alright; let's just say that you did not deceive me. But you were still wrong."

"I was wrong? Wrong about what?"

"Wrong about the setting sun." The little old granny pointed to the remaining half of the sun and said, "You said that we would arrived at Huangshi Town at sundown; you were wrong. I said arriving after sundown is correct."

"No, not right; right now we are entering Huangshi Town, aren't we right on time?"

"No, not right; we are not entering Huangshi Town."

"Why not go in?"

"Because we want to find Ximen Chuixue."

"Don't we have to go in to find Ximen Chuixue?"

"We don't." The little old granny pointed to the white tent outside the town, "Do you see that? Isn't that Ximen Chuixue's traveling tent?"

Naturally no one was in the tent.

However, this did not seem to surprise the little old man and the little old granny.

What surprised them was that when they were inside, they heard hoof beats outside.

Hoof beats should not be surprising either; what surprised them the most was that after the hoof beats, there was a sound of a long string of heavy wheels grinding the ground.

"What's that? Are they escorts?" the little old man asked.

"Do you know the best answer to that question?" the little old granny said.

"What is it?"

"Go out and have a look."

Before she finished speaking, both the little old man and the little old

granny were already out of the tent.

(Four)

Central Plains Escort Agency's banner was fluttering against the evening breeze, making a flapping noise.

Baili Changqing sat erect on the horseback, his eyes were bright and full of expression.

"Jin Peng, ahead is the Huangshi Town you mentioned?"

"That's right."

"Absolutely safe?"

"Our people came here once three months ago to investigate, everybody in town is locally born and bred, except one Sha Dahu."

"Sha Dahu?"

"Sha Dahu is an exiled aristocrat from out of the area, he dug the hill outside Huangshi town and suddenly found gold, hence he settled here. Because he is wealthy, occasionally he offered shelter to some fugitives."

"Fugitives?"

"But these fugitives' martial art skill, we only need to use one finger to knock them down."

"So, it seems to me that tonight we will be able to sleep peacefully."

"I think so too."

"What do you think?" the little old man asked.

"I think," the little old granny said, "There is only one condition that they may be able to sleep peacefully tonight."

"What condition?"

"Only the dead can have the most peaceful sleep."

"How could they die?"

"Carrying that much money, coming to this Huangshi Town, which looks tranquil on the surface, but like a roaring sea underneath, aren't they just looking for death?"

"How do you know that they are bringing a lot of money?"

"Didn't you see the wheel marks on the ground? Did you see how deep they are? Perhaps what they are bringing is gold."

"Probably not."

"Oh?"

"If they are bringing gold, how come they only take a few people?"

"So, what do you think they are escorting?"

"Stone."

"Stone?"

"Right, stone."

"How do you know?"

"Must be. I think their carts must be loaded with stone. Only by pretending would they be brazen enough to enter Huangshi Town with only a few people."

"Do you know who these few people are?"

"Who?"

"Their Head Escort Baili Changqing, Vice Head Escort Jin Peng, Emei Heroines Situ Feng, Situ Huang, Situ Ying, Situ Yan, and Jing Cheng (Taoist) Priest Jian Xuan [sword mysterious]."

"Really?"

"Have I been proven wrong?"

"Then they are really bringing gold?"

"I don't know."

"I know, I know. The best way is go and have a look."

Sha Dahu's house was already brightly lit.

To Sha Dahu, it was the biggest day of his life.

To be able to receive the Head Escort of the biggest escort agency in thirteen provinces from north to south, it was something that he did not even dare to hope for.

Therefore, other than telling his cook to prepare special dishes, he himself had been waiting at the main gate for the arrival of the honorable Baili Changqing.

And not only him, but the rest of Huangshi Town people were also waiting respectfully by his gate.

Everybody had a very proud expression on his face. Because, just like

the little beggar said, "They are here."

By 'they', naturally he was referring to the Central Plains Escort Agency people.

Actually, to be more precise, going a layer deeper, what the little beggar meant by 'they' ought to be the escorted money in the carts.

-- The gold that would not be spent in food and drink for eighty generations.

"They have entered Sha Dahu's house," the little old man said.

"Wow, the fish have entered the net."

"What do we do?"

"What do we do? Go watch a good show!"

"You still want to watch a good show at a time like this?"

"Well, what do you think we should do?"

"Go save them."

"Save them? Save who?"

"Those people, of course."

"Those people? They are not in any danger yet, they have not eaten their fill, they are not drunk, how could they be in danger?"

"That ..." the little old man did not know what to do.

"Let's go save them," the little old granny said.

"Didn't you say they are not in any danger?"

"I wasn't talking about them, I was talking about other people."

"Other people? Who?"

"He is not a who, he is Ximen Chuixue."

"Him? Do you know where he is?"

"Of course I do, otherwise, how could I propose to save him?"

"Why do you think he needs somebody to save him?"

"Because he is not in his tent, moreover, I saw Sha Dahu and the others are very happy. If Ximen Chuixue is still outside, would they be that

happy?"

"Why do you want to save Ximen Chuixue?"

"Didn't I tell you that he is my little friend?"

"And the little friend needs to be rescued?"

"Because right now this little friend can help us do a lot of things. For example, to see whether the carts are really loaded with stone, or with gold?"

"Why didn't we hurry up then?"

Before the little old man even finished speaking, he already ran away.

But he could not run away, because the back of his collar was being pulled by the little old granny.

"What are you doing?"

"I am the one who should be asking you this question: what are you doing?"

"Saving people, of course!"

"Saving people? Saving people is that way."

Night. Moonless night.

The prison cell that was usually very gloomy and eerie, in this kind of night, it looked even more gloomy and extremely eerie.

Looking at such gloomy and eerie prison cell, the little old man could not help furrowing his two eyebrows! As he furrowed his eyebrows, the little old granny also could not help furrowing her eyebrows.

"Why are you frowning?" the little old man asked.

"Because you are frowning!"

"Does my frown have anything to do with your frown?"

"Of course it does."

"What is it?"

"Because your frown looks like someone."

"Like the one that I think you are thinking?"

"Yes."

"Who is it?"

"Lu Xiaofeng."

"Really? I can look like Lu Xiaofeng?"

"That's right. It's just that your eyebrows and hair are grey. In other words, you look like Lu Xiaofeng with head and face filthy with grime [idiom: dejected and depressed]."

The little old man laughed. He felt very proud. "As long as I look like Lu Xiaofeng, why do I care about his hair and eyebrows?"

Suddenly he sighed. "Ay! Too bad ..."

"Too bad Lu Xiaofeng is dead?"

"That's one ..."

"And the other?"

"Too bad right now we have some business we have to deal with; otherwise, I wanted to treat you to eat and drink."

"Why?"

"Because no one ever said that I look like Lu Xiaofeng."

"What's so good about looking like Lu Xiaofeng? Some people even call Lu Xiaofeng Lu Xiaoji [little chicken]." The little old granny said, "Besides, Lu Xiaofeng's already dead, what's so good about saying that you look like a dead man?"

The little old man did not respond; he merely walked stealthily toward the prison door.

But his step was suddenly stopped by the little old granny.

"What are you doing?" the little old man said.

"What are you going to do?" the little old granny asked him back.

"Aren't we going to save people? Lu Xiaofeng is dead, we can't let Ximen Chuixue die too, can we?"

"I suddenly think that there is one thing more important than saving Ximen Chuixue. After we accomplish this one thing, it won't be too late to save him then."

"What is it?"

The little old granny did not answer, she only smiled a mysterious smile.

Chapter 20 – The smile of the Sword God

Very late at night, a moonless night.

If the banquet started at the first dim light of the night, then very late at night should be the time the banquet ended.

Therefore, it was also the time that the banquet in Sha Dahu's main hall should end.

Sha Dahu's feast was, of course, in honor of the respected guests of the Central Plains Escort Agency.

And at the end of Sha Dahu's feast, the ones that had to leave were, of course, also the escorts of the Central Plains Escort Agency.

When the guest escorts stood up to leave, Sha Dahu suddenly raised his cup and said, "There is one thing that I really regret."

"Sha Xiong's [brother Sha] magnificent hospitality in receiving us, we already cannot thank you enough, what regret does Sha Xiong have?" Baili Changqing said, cupping his fist.

"Meagre food and drink, Zongbiaotou honored me with your presence, that is giving me a lot of face already. So I have to drink this as a forfeit to show my regret."

"What is it?" Baili Changqing asked.

"My humble home is too small."

"Too small? What does too small have anything to do with Sha Xiong feeling so regretful?"

"Of course it does." Sha Dahu raised his cup and downed it in one gulp, "Because it is too small, I can only receive three esteemed guests of your precious Escort Agency."

Before Baili Changqing had any time to respond, the grocery store boss already scrambled to offer his place, "No problem, I can receive two at my place."

Gong Susu also did not want to be left out, "These two sisters, how about staying at my place?"

The coffin shop boss also spoke up, "If gentlemen have enough guts, and not afraid to sleep in coffins, there's enough room at my place for one or two more."

Naturally Baili Changqing could say nothing other than expressing his gratitude.

And thus, the Central Plains Escort Agency's personnel were separated from each other.

In fact, I should say that the Central Plains Escort Agency's power was

dispersed.

Although it was a moonless night, the outline of escort carriages parked in front of Sha Dahu's main gate could still be vaguely seen.

Not only the carriages were vaguely visible, even the escorts on duty guarding the carriages were also vaguely visible.

One of the guards suddenly fixed his eyes on a flowering shrub not too far from his position.

He saw a human shadow flashed by.

He did not make any noise, because he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. It's not unusual for people who have had quite a bit of drink to have dimmed eyesight.

However, even if he wanted to make noise, he could not.

Because one tiny golden needle has already flown out from the bushes where the human shadow disappeared earlier.

This golden needle was, naturally, flying toward the guard's throat.

Therefore, other than staring with eyes wide open and his right hand struggling to pull his saber out, he could not make the slightest noise.

Immediately afterwards, two blades already cut the other guard's throat. While at the same time a strip of rope already tightened around the third guard's neck.

Night. A very quiet night.

Although it was already very late at night, Gong Susu's residence was still as bright as day.

In the depth of the night, lantern light indoor usually gives travelers unbounded warmth and friendly feeling.

At least the two female escorts of the Central Plains Escort Agency were having this kind of feeling.

Therefore, as soon as they stepped into the main hall of Gong Susu's residence, they felt very comfortable. And comfortable people usually wanted to express their feelings.

Gong Susu only smiled as she listened to her guests expressing their admiration of the hostess and the hostess' residence. Only after they were finished did she start talking, "It's a rare occurrence that I get to meet two ladies; how about we have a little drink?"

Could people in such a cozy and warm atmosphere reject this kind of invitation?

Of course not.

Therefore, Gong Susu clapped her hands rather loudly.

Thereupon, very soon dishes of delicacies and pots of light wine were served on the table.

-- The delicacies and wine were served by an old woman.

If one was to observe carefully, one would find that this old woman's movement was unusually strong and healthy, nothing like an old woman at all.

And if one was able to raise the old woman's skirt, one would find that the old woman's legs were smooth, tender and lovely, just like a young woman's.

Naturally these facts failed to attract the two female escorts' attention.

Not only they did not notice these facts, they did not have the slightest bit of suspicions at all. As soon as Gong Susu raised her cup to offer a toast, they would also raise their cups and down the wine.

The old woman's response was very quick; as soon as their cups were empty, she poured the second cup for them.

And then the third cup.

By the fourth cup, the old woman suddenly raised the wine pot in her

right hand and smashed it toward the female escort on the right.

The female escort's countenance changed greatly; she wanted to raise her right hand to block; too bad she suddenly found out that she could not raise her right hand.

Her countenance was really too unsightly.

But she did not know that the countenance of her companion that was sitting next to her was even more unsightly. Because her head had already been smashed by the old woman's wine pot and it was bleeding profusely.

And her companion was trying to lift her hand to help her resisting the enemy, but not even a bit of strength was left.

She suddenly found out that all her limbs were numb. The only sense left on her was her sense of hearing.

She heard Gong Susu's gloomy and cold, yet triumphant, laughter.

All the lights in Gong Susu's residence suddenly went out.

It seemed like the night was getting even more gloomy and eerie.

And the night was not the only one that was gloomy and eerie; the coffin, and Zhao Xiazhi's laughter were also gloomy and eerie.

"Do you dare to sleep?" Zhao Xiazi's voice also sounded gloomy and eerie.

"Of course we do. We are used to roam the Jianghu, we have even slept in graveyards. Merely coffins, what are we afraid of? Isn't that right?"

The escort nudged his companion as he said those words. His companion immediately caught on, "Of course it's true; besides, these coffins are still new."

"Precisely because they are new that I am asking the two gentlemen if you dare to sleep in it."

"Why?"

"Because new coffins are usually reserved for people who had just died."

"Don't joke."

"You think I am joking?"

"Are you not?"

"He is not."

The last sentence suddenly came out of a coffin.

The two escorts could not help jumping up in fright.

Right when they were frightened, a man flew out of the coffin. Plus Zhao Xiazi's hands also turned into claws and clawed the escort standing right in front of him.

'Bang! Bang!' The two escorts' lives suddenly ended.

Zhao Xiazi reached out to catch the two escorts' bodies, one on each hand; with a forceful push, the two dead bodies fell straight and neatly into two new coffins.

Zhao Xiazi's face showed a smiling expression; he said to the man who had just flown out of a coffin, "Little Beggar, not bad, huh?"

"Of course not; such men, did they think they were fit to escort goods?"

"So what do you think they were fit to do?"

"Precisely this," the little beggar pointed to the coffins, "They only fit to sleep in coffins."

"You are absolutely right," Zhao Xiazi said, "I'll say not only these two, all of them are also only fit to sleep in my coffins. Little Beggar, how many more coffins are empty?"

"Seems to me not too many."

"Of course not many, only six left."

"Six? That many?"

"There are two in the grocery store, and two at Ol' Sha's place ..."

"Why only two at Ol' Sha's place? Aren't there three?"

"Three? Do you want to kill our Laoda [lit. 'old first' – leader of the group, boss] as well?"

"How do I dare?" the little beggar said, "That's only four. Who are the other two?"

"Did you forget that in the prison there are still Beef Soup and Ximen Chuixue?"

"How could I forget? Who could forget Ximen Chuixue?"

(Two)

That's right. Who could forget Ximen Chuixue?

At least the little old man has not forgotten.

After finishing the task the little old granny told him to do, the little old man hurried back to the little old granny to urge her, "Shouldn't we go to save Ximen Chuixue?"

"Of course. The time to save him is precisely right now!"

"Why is now the right time?"

"Because right now the Huangshi Town people are doing everything they can to deal with the Central Plains Escort Agency people; they won't send anybody to guard their prison."

"Are they able to kill all Central Plains Escort Agency people?"

"Most likely."

"Then why aren't you thinking of something to save them?"

"Do you have any idea on how to save them?"

The little old man did not say anything, because he did not have the answer. Just relying on their strength, could the two of them save those people?

Besides, this matter could not be revealed yet, because they still did not know who the mastermind was. If the mastermind was not found, who would believe a little old man and a little old granny's words? Who would believe that the honest people of Huangshi Town could plot against the

lives of the Central Plains Escort Agency people?

Even Lu Xiaofeng would not believe it. And that was the reason Lu Xiaofeng was killed here.

"Who do you think the mastermind is?" the little old man asked.

"Looking at the current situation, only two people are highest on the list of suspects."

"Which two?"

"Baili Changqing and Jin Peng."

"Those two? Why? One is the Central Plains Escort Agency's Head Escort, the other is Vice-Head Escort; why would they rob their own escorted goods?"

"Why not? Do you know the value of these escorted goods?"

"How much?"

"Thirty-five million taels of gold."

"That much?"

"That much money, even your sons and grandsons to the eightieth

generation will not be able to spend it all!"

"That much? Who wanted to send that much money?"

"According to what I heard, it is our current imperial court's war fund."

"Why do they want to send it away?"

"Because it is said that there is a rebellion in the south; therefore, the gold must be transferred someplace else, to be used for war purposes."

"Why didn't they send troops to transfer it?"

"Afraid that it might draw unnecessary attention, because it is still unclear whether there is armed rebellion in the south or not. If the news that the gold is being transferred ever leaks, rebellion might rise immediately, then they won't have time to prepare."

"Hence they hired Central Plains Escort Agency to escort the goods?"

"That's right," the little old granny said.

"It seems to me though, that this bunch of Huangshi Town people had already prepared their conspiracy for about half a year; how did they know that early?"

"That's why I suspect either Baili Changqing or Jin Peng is the

mastermind."

"Oh," the little old man said, "They were indeed the first person to know about the transfer of gold; however, they already cannot spend their own money in this lifetime, why would they want to rob the escorted goods?"

The little old granny laughed. "Right now, do you have money?" she asked.

"I do."

"How long before you use it all up?"

"Maybe until the day I die I won't use it all up."

"And if right now there are a million taels of gold in front of you, would you still want it?"

"If I don't want it," the little old man said, "That would be strange indeed."

"Therefore, who wouldn't want to have more riches?"

"There is one."

"Who?"

"Lu Xiaofeng."

The little old granny laughed again. "Of course a dead person does not want to have more riches," she said.

The little old man also laughed. He said, "Is Lu Xiaofeng really a dead person?"

"Don't tell me he is not?"

The little old man did not answer. Because suddenly he put his finger to his lips, making a shush-ing motion.

They were already outside the prison; hence the little old man told the little old granny not to make any noise.

Actually, even if the little old man and the little old granny spoke louder, nobody in the prison would be able to hear them.

Because practically there was no guard in the prison.

The only ones inside was Ximen Chuixue and Beef Soup. Besides, what's the big deal if these two hear their voices?

However, if there was anybody who had that kind of thought, he was wrong.

Because Ximen Chuixue had already heard the voices outside, and with his hand he extinguished the only oil lamp in the prison.

And then he pressed his mouth over Beef Soup's mouth and whispered in her ear these two words, "Be quiet!" And then without making any noise he pressed his body against the wall right next to the cell door.

The cell door was slowly pushed inward.

The direction the door was pushed happened to be toward where Ximen Chuixue was leaning against the wall.

When the cell door was half open, the little old man let out a surprised cry; indicating that he had just found out that the prison was pitch-black. And then they seemed to hear he mumbled something like, "Too late, Ximen Chuixue is not here."

"Who says I am not here?"

Following Ximen Chuixue's voice, a strong sword aura burst toward the little old man.

The little old man's body suddenly floated backward.

With an unimaginable speed Ximen Chuixue's sword stabbed the little old granny.

The little old granny did not back off, but with matchless speed she

raised both palms. This pair of palms was like seamless heaven's net; once the palms clamped, Ximen Chuixue's sword was caught.

"It's you?" Ximen Chuixue cried out in surprise.

"It's not me." The little old granny's answer was an unfathomable mystery.

"It's you." Ximen Chuixue said again. Then, he slowly pulled the sword away from the little old granny's hands. 'Cha', he lighted the fire paper.

As soon as the lamp was bright enough, Beef Soup knitted her eyebrows as she looked at the little old granny and said, "So it is you."

"Miss still remembers me?"

"Of course I do. When Sikong Zhaixing saw you, it was like he had just seen a ghost; who could have forgotten you?"

"Do you know her?" Ximen Chuixue seemed to talk a bit more than usual.

"I have seen her," Beef Soup said.

"Do you know who she is?"

"Who is she?"

"You really don't know?"

"Should I know her? Do you think I am Bai Xiaosheng[1]?"

"You don't have to be Bai Xiaosheng to know her."

"Oh? Who is she, actually?"

Ximen Chuixue did not answer; he just looked at the little old granny.

The little old granny did not answer either; she just looked at Beef Soup.

Beef Soup suddenly felt her face blushed, as if she was not being stared at by an old granny, but by a passionate young man.

"You are ..."

"That's right." The little old granny's voice suddenly became young, "I am."

(Three)

That's right, he was indeed Lu Xiaofeng. The unique and unmatched Lu Xiaofeng.

But didn't Lu Xiaofeng die?

"Die? How could Lu Xiaofeng die?" The little old granny laughter was very cheerful.

Looking at the little old granny's laughing expression, looking at her mischievous eyes, Beef Soup immediately knew that this little old granny was indeed Lu Xiaofeng.

Seeing Lu Xiaofeng did not die, Beef Soup ought to be happy, but she suddenly glowered and said angrily, "Why can't Lu Xiaofeng die? It would be best if Lu Xiaofeng died."

"Would it really be best if Lu Xiaofeng died?" the little old man, who was standing by the little old granny's side, suddenly said.

"You are you? What's your business in this matter?" Beef Soup asked.

"Me? I am a nobody. But if it were not for me, Lu Xiaofeng would really be dead."

"Why?"

"Because my disguising skill is number one under the heavens."

"You? You are Sikong Zhaixing?"

"That's right."

"Then ..." Beef Soup's jaw dropped, "Then who was that Sikong Zhaixing at the restaurant?"

"Him? He was the dead ghost Lu Xiaofeng."

"Isn't he Lu Xiaofeng?" Beef Soup pointed to the little old granny. She was really confused.

"He is the living Lu Xiaofeng."

"So who was that dead ghost Lu Xiaofeng when he was still alive?"

"Honest Monk!"

"Honest Monk?"

"That's right. It's just that he ought to be called Dishonest Monk."

"Why?"

"Because he was supposed to lie motionless in the coffin, yet he came looking for me, asking me to turn him into Ximen Chuixue. Pretending to be Ximen Chuixue no longer fun, he wanted to be me. Tell me, isn't he extremely dishonest?" Sikong Zhaixing said.

"So the one we saw in the coffin was Honest Monk?"

"Replacement guaranteed if not genuine, the one and only Honest Monk."

"But the one in the coffin was definitely a dead man."

"Naturally he was a dead man; otherwise, how could he deceive those bunch of Huangshi Town bandits?"

"If he was dead, how could he come back alive?"

"Because he is the Wulin world's unique and unmatched Honest Monk."

"So Honest Monk can comes back to live from the dead?"

"Of course."

"How come?"

"Because Honest Monk has mastered the Gui Xi Gong [lit. tortoise breathing skill]."

"Ah, I got it."

"Do you, really?"

"Of course. Precisely because Honest Monk knew Gui Xi Gong, Lu Xiaofeng looked for him and had Honest Monk masquerade him. And then he had him pretend to be dead. Am I right?"

"Absolutely correct. At that time you were hiding nearby and looking over my shoulder, weren't you?"

"Kiss my @ss," Beef Soup said, "But, there is one thing I do not understand."

"You don't understand why I wanted Honest Monk to pretend to be dead, am I right?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Right."

"Huangshi Town was originally a small town that did not attract anybody's attention. When I came here, I immediately noticed that everybody here was hiding his own martial art skill; hence I knew that there must be something big going on here."

"How did you know that they are hiding their martial art skill?"

"Don't forget, I am a little old granny. Just how many incidents in Jianghu have I witnessed with my own eyes? Do you think the little old granny have lived for several decades in vain?"

"Yes, yes, yes, my apology for not venerating you. Please forgive Xiao

Nuzi [lit. little woman (humble)] for not recognizing that Senior has a pair of formidable eyes." Beef Soup could not help giggling.

Lu Xiaofeng looked at Ximen Chuixue. "Therefore, I went to find Sikong Zhaixing and asked him to bring his disguising set and come with me. Contrary to my expectation, without any question he simply came with me to look for Honest Monk."

"When we found Honest Monk, I said bluntly, 'Monk, I want you to strip naked, right now.' Do you know what Honest Monk's reaction was when he heard my order?"

"He must be very surprised," Beef Soup replied.

"Wrong. Unexpectedly without making any noise he simply stripped stark naked. Later on he said to me: 'Appearance is empty, emptiness is appearance. I have never expected that finally Lu Xiaofeng is able to see through the world of mortals, he wants to wear Monk's clothes and leave home (to become a Buddhist monk).' Tell me, wasn't that annoying?"

"Not annoying," Beef Soup replied.

"Oh? Why not?"

"Because you came to see him, your intention was to have him die in your place. He made sport of you with several sentences, what's so annoying about that?"

Lu Xiaofeng suddenly stared at Beef Soup.

"What are you looking at?"

"I suddenly realize that you are very understanding of other people's view. Hence I want to see if you are the real Beef Soup or not."

"What do you think?"

"It's very hard to say, especially since you have been together with Sikong Zhaixing."

Right this moment, Ximen Chuixue, who usually talked very few, suddenly opened his mouth, "I understand now."

"What is it?"

"They thought you were dead, hence they relaxed their guard, and thus you were able to secretly investigate their conspiracy."

"You do understand."

"So what is their conspiracy?" Beef Soup asked.

"I am going to take all of you to see their plot right now."

(Four)

Sha Dahu's main hall.

A man was tied to the pillar in the main hall, a man with disheveled hair and a body full of wounds.

This man apparently struggled and fought hard before he was captured and bound to the pillar.

The man was precisely the Head Escort of Central Plains Escort Agency, the biggest escort agency in thirteen provinces from north to south, Baili Changqing.

The atmosphere in the main hall was very depressing.

Baili Changqing was gasping for breath, but he glowered at the rest of the people there with fiery eyes.

Sha Dahu was pacing back and forth with his hands behind his back; his head hung low. Gong Susu and the lady boss were sitting quietly on chairs. The little beggar and Zhao Xiazi were looking at each other, without saying a single word.

The atmosphere was so depressing that they all felt difficulty breathing.

The first person unable to bear it much longer was Zhao Xiazi. He suddenly sprang up and said loudly, "Why did Jin Laoda [see note above] want to keep him alive and become a living mouth?"

Sha Dahu turned around to face Zhao Xiazi. "Jin Laoda must have had his reasons," he said.

"That's right, I do have my reasons." From the inner hall Jin Peng walked out, he was wearing an extremely gorgeous outfit, adorned with gold trim all around.

Jin Peng's clothes were bright and dazzling, but his countenance was so gloomy that nobody wanted to cast him a glance. "Do you know why I wanted to keep a living mouth?" he asked.

He glowered at Baili Changqing, but Baili Changqing also glowered back at him.

"I spent considerable effort to arrange this foolproof plan." Jin Peng's gaze moved from Baili Changqing to look at the eyes of everybody else in the hall. "We killed a lot of Huangshi Town people in order to replace them with you. But now the enterprise is ruined for the sake of one basketful; do you know why?"

Nobody answered, because nobody knew the reason. They did not even know what Jin Peng was talking about, and nobody was too clear on what's going on either.

Thereupon, Jin Peng had no choice but to take them out of the main hall, and out to the place where the escort carts were parked.

"Open up," Jin Peng barked his order.

The chest on the escort cart was opened.

Originally it was supposed to be filled with glistening yellow, dazzling and brilliant gold, but now suddenly it was dull and dark. Unexpectedly the gold had turned into matte black scrap metal.

Everybody could only stare blankly.

"Do you understand now?" Jin Peng said, "Because the gold has been swapped, now it is boxes after boxes of scrap iron."

They returned to the main hall.

The atmosphere in the hall was getting even more depressing. It was so depressing that not only they felt difficulty in breathing, they also did not dare to lift up their heads.

With all heads down, they watched as Jin Peng walked in and put a piece of matte black scrap metal on the table. And then, all eyes were turned toward their boss, Jin Peng.

"This means one of us has leaked this secret."

"There is a spy among us?" Sha Dahu asked.

"Who?" the lady boss asked.

Lady boss' fiery eyes were fixed at Zhao Xiazi.

Zhao Xiazi jumped in fright, but he stared back at the lady boss. And then, he suddenly turned his gaze toward the little beggar.

In turn, the little beggar's eyes stared at Gong Susu. Gong Susu had her eyes fixed on the grocery store boss, and the boss stared at the lady boss.

Everybody was staring at each other.

The air seemed to be even heavier.

Jin Peng rose up from his chair, and said, "The most important thing right now is not to find who the traitor is." While speaking, he walked over to Baili Changqing. "The most important thing is to find where the swapped gold is."

He suddenly grabbed Baili Changqing's hair and said, "You should know by now why I wanted to leave a living mouth. If you tell me the gold's whereabouts, not only will I let you go, I will also let your people go, I won't investigate who the traitor was, and will give you a share of the gold."

Baili Changqing raised his head, he looked at Jin Peng; suddenly he opened his mouth and "Pei!" he angrily spat a mouthful of phlegm mixed with blood toward Jin Peng's face.

"Good spit!" a voice came from the doorway.

Everybody turned their eyes to the door, they all fixed their gaze at the speaker's face.

Nobody recognized the speaker. Because she was just a little old granny.

The little old granny said, "If there is really one person who believed what you said, then it would be like seeing ghost in bright daylight."

"Who are you?" Jin Peng angrily asked.

"Me? I am a dead person."

"Absurd!" Jin Peng flew up and launched a palm attack toward the little old granny.

Light as a feather the little old granny dodged the attack and said, "Without asking clearly who I am you just attacked me. What if you suffer a setback?"

Jin Peng ignored this remark; moving his palms like a whirlwind, he launched killer moves one after another.

The little old granny only smiled as she dodged the attack, without launching even one move of counterattack.

The people watching did not dare to believe their eyes.

In all the world, probably there was only one person who was able to dodge Jin Peng's continuous attack for more than thirty moves without fighting back.

-- Lu Xiaofeng.

Didn't Lu Xiaofeng die?

This question surged into everybody's mind. Suddenly the little beggar had a brainwave. He recalled the little old granny's answer when she had just walked in.

-- I am a dead person.

The little beggar's body suddenly shook.

"What's wrong with you?" Zhao Xiazhi asked.

"He ... he ... he is Lu Xiaofeng."

Zhao Xiazhi and the others were shocked.

The little old granny, who was dodging here and there, suddenly flew up and made seven somersaults in the air, while saying, "That's right, I am indeed Lu Xiaofeng."

The disguise on her face had already been removed while she was doing the somersaults. Hence by the time she landed on the ground, she had turned into Lu Xiaofeng.

"You didn't die?" Gong Susu cried out in surprise.

"Naturally I did not die; how could Lu Xiaofeng die? If I died, wouldn't your conspiracy succeed?"

"Who's that ..."

"You must be dying to know who died, aren't you?"

Nobody replied, because that was exactly what everybody wanted to know.

"Let me tell you: no one died. There was only someone pretended to be dead."

"Pretended to be dead?"

"The one pretended to be dead was Honest Monk." Lu Xiaofeng said, "I asked Sikong Zhaixing to alter his appearance, so that he would look like me. And then we tied a piece of iron and a bag of blood onto his chest ..."

"Do you remember that evening when you surrounded me? The truth is, you were surrounding Honest Monk. The real me has been watching you from the side."

"I noticed that you, Sha Dahu, were using the Japanese Divine Wind Saber Technique; hence I knew that you are indeed a bunch of big bandits of the rivers and oceans who kill without blinking an eye."

"That evening, Honest Monk deliberately dodged to the left and flashed to the right. Finally he bumped his chest onto Gong Ping's sword. The blood bag was pierced and spilled blood, Honest Monk then utilized his Gui Xi Gong and fell to the ground. At that time it was already very dark, naturally you could not see clearly; moreover, you were too confident of Gong Ping's sword."

"And that was the reason she died under Ximen Chuixue's sword," Sha Dahu said.

"She died because of too much self-confidence; and you fail because of humanity habitual character." Lu Xiaofeng said, "Who would think of giving another sword stab to a dead body? Nobody. And that was the reason Monk was successful in faking death."

"Don't be too proud of yourself Lu Xiaofeng," the lady boss said, "Ximen Chuixue and Beef Soup are still in our hands."

"Is that so?" a voice replied from the doorway.

The voice, naturally, belonged to Beef Soup, a very-pleased-with-herself kind of voice.

This time, Ximen Chuixue who normally did not like to talk, spoke up, "If

I did not intentionally let myself be captured, how could Jin Peng's secret be exposed?"

No one responded. Because everybody's countenance was as ugly as dirt.

"There is one thing I still don't understand," Jin Peng said.

"What is it?" Lu Xiaofeng asked.

"Did you swap the gold?"

"Yes."

"With you alone, can you swap that much gold?"

"Actually, I did not swap the gold at all."

"I don't understand."

"Very simple."

Lu Xiaofeng walked over to the table and picked up the piece of scrap metal left there earlier. He took out his jade fan and used it to scrape the scrap metal.

The matte black color was gradually scraped off, and the glistening,

yellow shiny gold color was restored.

Everybody was stunned.

"These gold," Lu Xiaofeng said, "Were only coated with a layer of special color; that's all."

"But, with you alone, how could you do it?"

"Naturally he couldn't." Another voice came in from the door.

This time, Honest Monk was wearing his own Buddhist robe. Sikong Zhaixing was also clad in the outfit he usually wore when he went out to pick star [reminder: 'zhai xing' means picking star].

"Without the help of me, Honest Monk, how could Lu Xiaofeng paint that much gold?"

"Don't you forget to mention my contribution. Without Sikong Zhaixing, the two of you with only four hands, can't possibly coat that much gold."

Nobody said anything. In fact, what can they say? Treason has been exposed, what else there is to say?

The only thing that can be said, was to express their anger using their lives, their blood.

Consequently, Jin Peng suddenly drew the sword hanging on his waist and attacked Lu Xiaofeng.

Sha Dahu and Zhao Xiazi attacked Ximen Chuixue.

The lady boss attacked Beef Soup.

Gong Susu attacked Sikong Zhaixing.

And the little beggar went for Baili Changqing that was tied to the pillar.

The most promising attack was, naturally, the little beggar.

Because Baili Changqing was, after all, helpless to fight back.

However, the little beggar was mistaken.

The ropes binding Baili Changqing suddenly shattered like pieces of paper, while his fist, in the moment when the little beggar thought his attack would go smoothly, struck the little beggar's chest.

The little beggar fell down. While he was falling, he heard Baili Changqing said, "While dodging Jin Peng's attack, Lu Xiaofeng already broke the ropes binding me with his internal energy."

A major battle. Very soon the battle was over.

Because, in all the world, who could resist Lu Xiaofeng and Ximen Chuixue? Not to mention the two of them were fighting together? Even more, they had Honest Monk and Sikong Zhaixing by their side?

Besides, evil will never prevail.

Early morning, fog.

Surprisingly, there was no wind in Huangshi Town that particular morning.

No wind to blow the yellow sandy soil that usually filled the air.

Perhaps even the wind knew that the storm brewing in Huangshi Town had finally died down.

The sun rose slowly.

Streaks of sunlight penetrated the fog, reflected by the glistening, shiny gold on the ground.

Baili Changqing was laughing a very satisfied laugh, while supervising his escort troops handling boxes of gold.

One of the escorts looked up and asked Baili Changqing, "Who saved us?"

"Other than he, who else?"

"He? Who is he?"

"He is me."

The escorts were stunned; because that sentence actually came from three people.

One was a little old man, one was a little old granny, and the third was Lu Xiaofeng.

The little old man removed his disguise; turned out he was Sikong Zhaixing.

The little old granny turned out to be Lu Xiaofeng.

And Lu Xiaofeng turned out to be Honest Monk.

All the escorts laughed.

Beef Soup's giggle was heard above the laughter.

Of all these laughter, the loudest and brightest was, unexpectedly, Lu Xiaofeng's.

Because, he heard the laughter of one person. This person has never laughed.

And this person was, naturally, Ximen Chuixue.

THE END

[1] Bai Xiaosheng and the weapons list figured most prominently in the Little Li Flying Dagger book. He made a physical appearance in 多情剑客无情剑, where he worked with Lin Xian'er to steal martial arts manuals from Shaolin. He was killed by Li Xunhuan while holding the Abbot of Shaolin hostage. If they are referring to the same people, then this should take place 50-100 years after the Li Xunhuan novels. Because after Li Xunhuan was the Ye Kai/Fu Hongxue generation, then followed by the Gongzi Yu generation, after which the ties to the original novels peter out. (Courtesy of Ren Wo Xing)